

Three Studies on Judeo-Persian Epics

By

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[Writings by Vera B. Moreen](#), and references to her works at *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

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The Legend of Adam in the Judeo-Persian Epic "Bereshit [Nāmah]" (14th Century)

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THE LEGEND OF ADAM IN THE JUDEO-PERSIAN EPIC *BERESHIT /NĀMAH/* (14TH CENTURY)

VERA B. MOREEN

Judeo-Persian literature is one of the most promising and least explored corners of Jewish belles-lettres. At the center of this corner, and surely its greatest achievement, is the cycle of two epics based on the Pentateuch composed by Mawlānā Shāhīn-i Shirāzī in the fourteenth century. Undoubtedly inspired by the great epics of Iranian literature, Firdawṣī's (d. 1010) *Shāh Nāmah* and Nizāmī's (d. 1209) epic romances, the *Khamsa*, or Quintet, Shāhīn aspired to similar literary heights through his versification of sizeable parts of the Pentateuch.

Shāhīn's biography is impossible to reconstruct based on the scant information available. As his *nisbah* indicates, he lived in Shirāz, but some have claimed Kāshān as his native town.¹ In Shāhīn's day Shirāz was the thriving capital of the province of Fārs ruled by the Il-khanid dynasty (descendants of Genghis Khān), who reigned until the city fell to Timūr (Tamerlane) in 1393. Shāhīn's floruit, the only solid information we possess about him, links him to the reign of Sultan Abū Sa'īd (1316–36). This is revealed in the panegyrics he addressed to Abū Sa'īd in two of his works, chapter four of *Mūsā Nāmah* and chapter five of *Ardashīr Nāmah*.² The conventional words of praise in these panegyrics do not mean that Shāhīn had direct contact

¹ Wilhelm Bacher, *Zwei jüdisch-persische Dichter Schahin und Imrani* (Budapest, 1907), p. 9; Amnon Netzer, *Montakhab-i ish'ar-i farisi az asār-i yahudiyān-i Irān* (Tehran, 1973), p. 37.

² *Sefer sharh-i Shāhīn 'al ha-Torah*, ed. S. Ḥakham (Jerusalem, 1901), pp. 2–3, and Dorothea Blieske, *Šāhīn-e Šīrazīs Ardašīr Buch* (Ph.D. diss., Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Tübingen, 1966), pp. 48–50.

with the sultan for they consist of general flatteries. Nor are we in a position to ascertain whether a Jew could have had access to the ruler despite the greater tolerance of the Mongols and of many of their descendants; but this possibility cannot be ruled out. More exciting, and perhaps more important from a literary point of view, is the fact that Shāhīn was an older contemporary of Iran's greatest lyrical poet Hāfiẓ (ca. 1320–88), though we know of no link between the two poets.

Shāhīn seems to have set to verse only the narrative, nonlegal portions of the Pentateuch. His interest appears to be focused on biblical heroes and their deeds, just as the great Iranian epics are generally hero oriented. In order to glorify the major characters of the Pentateuch, Shāhīn uses not only Midrashic embellishments but their Muslim counterparts as well. As this study shows, Shāhīn does not hesitate to use Muslim sources, especially the *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* ('stories about the prophets') genre on which he seems to rely heavily.

Since his epics have survived only in Judeo-Persian manuscripts, Shāhīn's audience must be presumed to have been primarily Jewish. However, the language of the epics is classical Persian, and because all epic literature in Iran circulated orally we can assume that Shāhīn's Muslim neighbors would also have been attracted to stories they could not only understand but in which they could recognize familiar strands from their own tradition.

It is not entirely clear in what order Shāhīn versified his epics. According to Wilhelm Bacher, one of the earliest scholars of Judeo-Persian literature, and more recently, according to Amnon Netzer, the Genesis epic is the last composition of the cycle. Known either as *Bereshit [Nāmah]* or as *Yūsuf and Zulaykha*, this part of the epic appears to have been written in 1358.³ Shāhīn's own name for the cycle of epics as a whole or for the individual epics does not seem to have survived. In 1901,

³ Bacher, *Zwei Dichter*, p. 9. A. Netzer, "A Judeo-Persian Footnote: Shāhīn and 'Emrāni," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 259.

Shim'on Hakham, a Bukharan rabbi who emigrated to Jerusalem, published the entire cycle in a noncritical edition under the all-encompassing title *Sefer sharh-i Shāhīn 'al ha-Torah*. It is he who bestowed separate titles to its two major components, *Bereshit* [*Nāmah*] [(The Book of) Genesis] and *Mūsā Nāmah* [The Book of Moses]. The second composition, about which I have written elsewhere,⁴ seems to be the earlier layer of the epic cycle; it was composed in 1327.⁵ In addition to these, Shāhīn has written at least two other epics inspired by biblical tales, *Ardashīr Nāmah*, based on the Book of Esther, and *Ezra Nāmah*, its possible continuation, based on the Book of Ezra. According to Amnon Netzer, the last two epics were composed around 1332.⁶

The literary and historical value of Shāhīn's epics remains to be determined through analysis of his language and imagery, literary sources, diction and rhetoric. Only studies of all these components can establish the nature and extent of Shāhīn's indebtedness to his Iranian Muslim literary environment and thus determine the boundaries of his originality. Then his place in the ranks of the distinguished Jewish poets of the Middle Ages can be evaluated.

This introductory study will confine itself to an analysis of Shāhīn's sources in his treatment of the theme of Adam's "fall" in *Bereshit* [*Nāmah*].

Shāhīn's *Bereshit* [*Nāmah*] is a *masnavī*⁷ approximately nine thousand verses long, divided into 159 chapters. It is set in the epic meter *hazaj musaddas* (u---/u---/u--). The order of its contents generally follows that of the weekly divisions of the

⁴ See my article, "Moses, the Faithful Shepherd: An Episode from Shāhīn's Judeo-Persian Epic *Mūsā Nāmah* (14th century)," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 107-130.

⁵ Bacher, *Zwei Dichter*, p. 8; Netzer, "A Judeo-Persian Footnote," p. 258.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A *masnavī* consists of a series of rhymed distichs. It was a literary vehicle used often in classical Persian literature, its subjects ranging from "heroic, historic, and romantic epic poetry," to didactic and scientific discourses. See Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, 1968), p. 98.

Torah, the *parashot ha-shev'a* interspersed, as we shall see, with an abundance of Midrashic, and especially, Muslim legendary elements.

Before analyzing the story, let me summarize Shāhin's account of the creation of Adam and his "fall."⁸ Shāhin devotes approximately 331 verses scattered in thirteen chapters (13–26) to Adam's history based primarily on the biblical accounts. He begins in chapter 10 by explaining, as does the Midrash, that God created Adam on Friday, over the opposition of the angels, because He wished to bestow on him and on his progeny dominion over all the wonderful things He had created.⁹ According to Shāhin God planned to create Adam out of earth and light:

(v. 214) Man's clay is kneaded out of pure light,
[out of] water and earth mixed together.

He does not specify from where the soil for Adam's body was taken.¹⁰ Having created him superior to all previous creations, God asked the angels to bow before Adam's still lifeless frame. The angels obeyed, all except Satan, whose act of defiance, conceived here almost entirely in Muslim legendary terms, earned him expulsion from heaven as well as eternal damnation.¹¹ After his conflict with Satan God turned His attention

⁸ I retain this term so clearly associated with a Christian interpretation of the event only because of its convenient brevity. Its use does not imply that Shāhin, like Christian interpreters of the story, viewed Adam's expulsion from Paradise as a "moral" flaw. For a clear exposition of the Christian attitude, see now Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York, 1988), p. xxvi.

⁹ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1968 reprint of 1907 ed.), 1:52ff. All verse numbers refer to the Hakham edition [BN] of Shāhin's epic (see above, n. 2).

¹⁰ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (New York, 4th ed., 1981), p. 77.

¹¹ See my forthcoming study, "A Dialogue between God and Satan in Shāhin's *Bereshit Namah* (14th century)" delivered at "Irano-Judaica," the Second International Conference on Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture, Jerusalem, July 9–12, 1990. At the conference A. Netzer informed me that he

again to Adam, “caress[ing] him with the bounty of His own light/ ma[king for him] an umbrella [out] of His Mercy.”¹² As soon as he was endowed with soul, Adam jumped up and uttered spontaneous praises of God, testifying to His oneness and might. At once God rewarded him further by bestowing on him “all knowledge and [of] mysteries,” including knowledge of His Exalted Names.¹³ God then explained to Adam that everything He had created was for his sake and for the sake of his descendants whom God would always protect.¹⁴ He placed Adam in the Garden of Eden drawing his attention to all its delights:

(v. 407) Know that the delights of Paradise are countless,
 its roses are without thorns, its wine without
 intoxication.

However, He warned Adam not to eat of the wheat¹⁵ in the garden lest he die. But

(v. 415) Adam’s heart inclined toward the wheat;
 since God forbade it, he did not eat of it.
 But of the delights of Paradise, great and small,
 Adam loved it best of all.

Confessing his love for this particular tree[!] Adam asked God for it. God consented enjoining him again not to eat from it.

At this point Shāhīn interrupts his tale with a number of didactic verses pondering the events unfolding in the Garden of

has also worked on both the Adam and Satan themes in *Bereshit /Nāmah*. He showed me the galley proofs of his forthcoming article, “The Story of Adam in the *Bereshit-nāmah* of Shāhīn,” and I am grateful for his drawing my attention to some sources I refer to elsewhere.

¹² BN, v. 343.

¹³ BN, v. 352–354; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:61–62.

¹⁴ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:62.

¹⁵ Jewish sources give several identifications of the forbidden fruit: “fig, grape, apple of paradise (*etrog*), wheat (which grew on stalks as tall as the cedars of Lebanon), and the nut” (Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:97 n. 70 and the sources cited there).

Eden. He poses three questions: 1. Did God actually give the wheat to Adam as a gift? 2. Why did Satan/Iblis lose his dwelling in Paradise? 3. Why was Iblis cursed for not bowing down before Adam while idolatrous men are not similarly cursed? The answers are discussed below (pp. 168–170).

Shāhīn mentions that Adam had another wife before Eve. Without naming her he explains why she was not a suitable mate for Adam:

(v. 462) Adam was made out of earth and she out of air;
they did not delight one another.
Earth and air cannot be friends;
toil comes to earth from air.

But, seeing how miserable she made him, God had mercy on Adam and “took that *div* away.”¹⁶ Adam felt profoundly lonely, especially when he saw all the paired creatures in Paradise. After bestowing proper names on them, according to Shāhīn, he actually asked God for a mate:

(v. 478) ...these are all male and female;
they are all each other’s companions.
I also need a mate with whom
to share joys and sorrows frankly.”

God then created Eve in the manner related in Genesis. She was extremely lovely:

(v. 484) When Adam awoke from his pleasant sleep
he saw a sun-cheeked moon at his side.
Of subtle heart, and lovely appearance,
of delicate cheer, a rose-cheeked beauty:
light shone from her countenance;

¹⁶ BN, v. 466; *Divs* are the demons of Iranian mythology. The term derives from the Avestaic and Vedic “daeva” and the Pahlavi “dēv,” meaning ‘demon,’ ‘devil’. In Muslim Iran they came to share many of the characteristics of Satan. For a fuller explanation, see David Yeroushalmi, *The Judeo-Persian ‘Emrānī and His Ganj-Nāme* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1986), p. 239 n. 12.

Adam's soul was astonished by that hour.
 When he beheld this charming creature,
 slender, delicate, good, and desirable
 her appearance like the shining sun,
 a lovely face, a stature like a cypress,
 Adam fell deeply in love with her
 and praised the God of heavens.

Shāhīn describes the bliss of the first couple in raptured verses. Then in chapter 18 he returns to recount Iblīs's vengeful state of mind ever since his expulsion from Paradise. In Iblīs's estimation his fall from grace was entirely due to Adam. He plotted his revenge and planned to trick Adam so that he too would be expelled from the Garden of Eden, but as Iblīs explains to the snake, he had a hard time trying to outwit Adam:

(v. 542) “I am unable to deceive him; greater is he
 than the deeds of three hundred like Iblīs.”

He saw his chance once Eve was created. Delighted by her loveliness Iblīs was nevertheless prepared to use her for his ends, mysteriously aware of the fact that “woman is good at deception.”¹⁷ He pondered his plan long and hard and determined that he must first find a partner to help him. He chose the snake, one of the most beautiful creatures in the Garden,¹⁸ and through flattery and friendship obtained its cooperation. He urged the snake to tempt Eve:

(v. 545) “Adroitly and with a sweet tongue
 you can surely make her go astray.
 Even a good woman can deviate from the road
 pursuing the gratification of her desires.

¹⁷ BN, v. 511.

¹⁸ Both Jewish and Muslim sources claim that prior to its role in the ensuing deception the snake was one of the loveliest creatures in Paradise. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:71–72; W.M. Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā’i* (Boston, 1978), p. 38.

Guide her along with the grain of wheat;
turn that moon-faced one astray."

If Eve succumbed she was bound to pull her husband along, Iblis assured the snake, and then both would be deprived of immortality; they would be expelled from Paradise. The snake accepted Iblis's assignment, and as it is well known, he had no difficulty persuading Eve to taste the wheat, promising her power and immortality. Eve, in turn, encountered little difficulty persuading Adam. Once they both ate,

(v. 582) Their understanding increased in that instant:
 turning away from order and custom,
 their sight was opened wide;
 they looked into Creation.
 They knew that they were bare and naked;
 their eyes shed tears of pain.

That moment of awareness was followed immediately by remorse. When God called out to Adam, the latter was already hiding in a tree out of fear and dread. When questioned by Him, Adam confessed that it was Eve who offered the wheat. She, in turn, blamed the snake, and it blamed Iblis. Upon God's reprimand Iblis showed no remorse maintaining that Adam got what he deserved. It was, after all, on his account that

(v. 617) "I fell from exaltation into evil;
 I am cut off from those near Your threshold.
 I have not repaid him one in a hundred [yet]...
 I am his enemy for all eternity."

God then reiterated His curse of Iblis:

(v. 622) ..."O you who are ill-starred,
 you will remain accursed until Resurrection
 Day.
 You will never escape from the curse;
 You will remain eternally in My wrath."

The other protagonists were also cursed in the well-known fashion. The snake, in particular, was punished by losing its famous beauty. In a logical manner Adam was enjoined to earn his livelihood through the instrument of his downfall:

(v. 660) “You’ve eaten of the fruit which makes one die
and have relinquished immortality forever.
Since you ate wheat, work with it;
keep farming, like it or not.
Work with it, eat it, until in old age,
limping, you’ll die at last a hard death.
I have created you from earth; you will
return to it quickly when it’s time to go.”

Unlike Iblis, both Adam and Eve repented intensely for their deed. According to Shāhīn, they fell in different places on earth when they were chased out of the Garden. Adam fell on a mountain top in Sarandil,¹⁹ where he spent a hundred years crying and roaming about in penitential worship. His penitence was rewarded:

(v. 690) The Almighty forgave him on account of that
affliction...
Forgave him, absolved him of his sin...
Adam became again one of the Palace elite,
knowledgeable in all the sciences.

Shāhīn describes briefly a similar mode of repentance through which Eve was absolved. After their separation the two parents of mankind met again after a hundred years. Forgiven by God and forgiving each other, they proceeded with joy to create the first family.

One of the most interesting areas open for investigation in Shāhīn’s epics is the nature and identity of the non-biblical and non-Jewish sources he used. Although he seems to have relied on Midrashim, my investigation thus far seems to indicate that he is deeply indebted to *isra’iliyyāt* literature, that is, to Muslim

¹⁹ See below, n. 55.

literature that deals with themes and characters from the Pentateuch. In what follows, I will demonstrate Shāhīn's reliance on Muslim sources through a number of details found in his treatment of the legends about Adam.

There is no need to go into a complete recounting of the ample details that surround Adam's history in Jewish sources. But, as we shall see, Shāhīn borrows a number of important details from the Koran. It is doubtful that he does so consciously or that he was personally able to read the Koran in Arabic. After all, the purpose of Judeo-Persian texts was to disseminate knowledge through the Hebrew script and avoid acquaintance with the script and language of Islam. Nevertheless, Koranic stories, as these came to be known through the popular versions based on Koranic commentaries, and especially through the *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* genre,²⁰ must have been pervasive in Shāhīn's environment.

The Koran mentions Adam several times. At least on two occasions, in Suras 7:19–25 and 20:115–122, it mentions Adam's act of disobedience. The first passage reads:

²⁰ The popular genre of story telling about the prophets, known as *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, flourished in the Muslim world in the first two centuries after the advent of Islam when there was intense contact between the conquering Muslims and the conquered Christian and Jewish populations of the Near East. It would appear that the amplification of the Koranic tales was the achievement of Jewish converts to Islam. The various versions of the stories remained in oral circulation and were popular mostly among the uneducated classes who had little or no access to the more learned literature of *ḥadīth* and Koranic commentaries developing around the same time. Eventually, with the decline of the role of storytellers (*qāṣṣ*, pl. *qūṣṣāṣ*), the tales were collected and written down. Some of the most important collections are: Abū Ishaq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī's (d. 1036) *Ara'is al-majālis: Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, Ṭarafī's (977–1062) collection, and especially the collection of al-Kīsā'i compiled before the tenth century. (See A. Shussman's study, *Stories of the Prophets in Muslim Tradition* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1981, p. ix.) In Persian, the most authoritative collection appears to have been Abū Ishaq Ibrāhīm b. Manṣūr b. Khalaf al-Nisābūrī's (11th century); see note 26.

This summary is based on Thackston, *The Tales*, pp. xiv–xvi.

19. And (unto man): O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat from whence you will, but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrong-doers.
20. Then Satan whispered to them that he might manifest unto them that which was hidden from them of their shame, and he said: Your Lord forbade you from this tree only lest ye should become angels or become of the immortals.
21. And he swore unto them (saying): Lo! I am a sincere adviser unto you.
22. Thus did he lead them on with guile. And when they tasted of the tree their shame was manifest to them and they began to hide (by heaping) on themselves some of the leaves of the Garden. And their Lord called them, (saying): Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you: Lo! Satan is an open enemy to you?
23. They said: Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If thou forgive us not and have not mercy on us, surely we are of the lost!
24. He said: Go down (from hence), one of you a foe unto the other. There will be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a while.
25. He said: There shall ye live, and there shall ye die, and thence shall ye be brought forth.²¹

I cannot discuss here the extent to which Koranic narratives about Old and New Testament prophets are themselves based on Jewish and early Christian sources. Several scholars, foremost among them Abraham Geiger and Bernard Heller, have investigated this question rather thoroughly.²² My main concern here is to note that Koranic tales became ever more

²¹ *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, trans. Mohammed M. Pickthall (New York, n.d.), p. 123.

²² Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (1898; English trans., New York, 1970); Bernard Heller, "La légende biblique dans l'Islam," *REJ* 98 (1934): 1-18; idem., "Récits et personnages bibliques dans la légende mahométane," *REJ* 85 (1928): 113-136.

“fleshed out” in the popular imagination, and the extent to which the details present in these non-Koranic versions penetrated Jewish writings such as the Pentateuchal epics of Shāhīn.

There would appear to be little doubt, at least in the case of Shāhīn’s epics, that the intermediary between the Koran and the epics was the popular genre of *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’*. Specifically, as we shall see, it must have been the Persian collection of Abū Ishaq Ibrāhim b. Maṇṣūr b. Khalaf al-Nisābūrī, probably accessible to Shāhīn in an oral version, that was his principal source of information for the Muslim embellishments included in his epics. I will show below the close connection that appears to exist between the two works.

The first non-Jewish detail in Shāhīn’s narrative about Adam concerns Adam’s spontaneous praise of God as soon as he was created. Shāhīn has Adam declaim:

(v. 346) ...“Praise be to God, O Lord;
 I testify to Your oneness.
 You are the object of worship of those in space
 and without; the Lord of Heaven and Earth.
 You have been and will be forever...
 . . .
 It is fitting that You are the supreme God
 for You are all-knowing, clear-sighted, a true
 Guide.
 I acknowledge Your might...”

In al-Tha’labī we find that as soon as God endowed Adam with a soul, “God, the Exalted, inspired him to say: ‘Praise be to God, Lord of the two worlds,’²³ and this was the first [utterance] that came on his tongue...”²⁴ al-Kisā’ī, with his penchant for unusual details, says: “Then the spirit reached Adam’s nose and he sneezed. The sneeze opened the blocked passages, and Adam

²³ *Rabb al-‘alāmīn* is a Koranic epithet for God, master of this world and the world-to-come, master of the visible and the invisible worlds.

²⁴ al-Tha’labī, *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’ al-musamma ‘Ara’is al-majālis* (Beirut, 1985), p. 28.

said, "Praise be to God Who Is Now and Ever Shall Be." This was the first thing spoken by Adam."²⁵ Similarly, al-Nīsābūrī claims (in Arabic!) that "when the soul reached his head, he sneezed and God taught him to say, "Praise be to God!" "²⁶ It may be that these details ultimately go back to a Jewish source, such as *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, itself not earlier than the ninth century and possibly influenced by Muslim sources,²⁷ where we find that Adam, as soon as he was created and beheld the wonders of creation, was moved to utter the words of Ps. 104:24: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works!"²⁸

Muslim sources agree with Jewish claims in the Midrash that soon after he was created God endowed Adam with all types of knowledge.²⁹ But Shāhīn adds a detail that also seems to come from Muslim sources. He says:

(v. 354) He [Adam] came to know the Exalted Names;
God made him preferred above all.

To our ears this echoes the Koranic verse "And He taught Adam all the names," (Sura 2:31), which, in addition to referring to Adam naming all the creatures, "was sometimes explained to imply that God had granted Adam the knowledge of the divine names reflected in creation..."³⁰ These names refer to His Koranic attributes contained in "the chain of the ninety nine most beautiful names — names that were to play an important role in later mystical theories and in the life of prayer and were sometimes used in almost magical connections."³¹

²⁵ Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 26.

²⁶ al-Nīsābūrī, *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* [Dāstānḥā-yi payghāmbarān] (Tehran, 1961), p. 9.

²⁷ See Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot ve-toldoteihen: 'iyyunim be-hishtalshalut shel masorot* (Jerusalem, 1974), chap. 12, and Joseph Dan, *Ha-sippur ha-'ivri bimei ha-beynayim* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 134–136.

²⁸ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 79.

²⁹ Thackston, *The Tales*, pp. 28–30; al-Tha'labi, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 28.

³⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1975), p. 188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Lest the objection be made that this could be a kabbalistic allusion to God's names I hasten to add that I found no indication thus far that Shāhīn was acquainted with Kabbalah in any form whereas the growing evidence of his knowledge of Muslim/Sufi concepts is startling.³²

We need not investigate too deeply the nature of the forbidden fruit to discuss its attractiveness for Adam and Eve. Suffice it to mention that in Muslim sources it is always grain, most often wheat, that is involved which does not prevent some Muslim authors from referring to it as growing on a tree....³³ However, the detail concerning Adam's attraction to the tree on which it grew and his asking God for it can only be found in Muslim sources, specifically in al-Nisābūrī who says:

Question: "Why did He command that they place Adam's throne in front of that tree which was prohibited to him?"
 Answer: "As a means of kindness because Adam, after seeing all the delights of Paradise, liked nothing better than the wheat tree [sic!], so much so that he asked the Glorious and Exalted One: 'O Lord, give this tree to me that it be my very own.' He said: 'I give it to you.' Then He said: 'The tree is yours, but don't eat from it...'"³⁴

In fact, Shāhīn practically gives away his reliance on al-Nisābūrī by borrowing even the latter's format of question and answer in the verses that follow the description of Adam's attraction to the tree. One of the rhetorical questions Shāhīn asks in his account is whether God actually gave the wheat to Adam as a present. His answer makes little sense because he is providing al-Nisābūrī's answer without al-Nisābūrī's question. Al-Nisābūrī has *Adam* ask God, after the latter gives him the tree:

"Why did you give [it] if You are prohibiting [it]" He [God] said: "You are a noble guest and I am a noble host. It

³² See my studies mentioned above in notes 4 and 11.

³³ See the quotation below.

³⁴ al-Nisābūrī, *Qisās*, p. 17.

is not fitting that [guests] should eat their own bread at the table of nobles." That is why He prohibited it to him.³⁵

Shāhīn provides only this answer:

(v. 422) ...in the house of generous men the guest
is faulted if he eats of his own bread.

This answer is unintelligible without al-Nīsābūrī's question. In an anachronism that is not out of place if one considers God's omniscience and the claim of Jewish sages that ordinary time sequence is not applicable to the Torah, the meaning of this verse is clarified. Since, as a result of his act of disobedience, Adam became a farmer working with wheat, it behooved him not to eat of his own produce in God's house.

Al-Nīsābūrī is probably Shāhīn's source for the third question he asks, namely, why Iblīs was punished for not bowing down before Adam while many idolaters have not been similarly punished. In a different context, while discussing what would have happened if Adam had been allowed to stay in Paradise, al-Nīsābūrī theorizes that

this would not have been appropriate because offspring were destined to come from him, some infidels others Muslims; they would all be his descendants but Paradise is not a place for infidels. So He created a reason for his [Adam's] expulsion so that infidels and believers could be separated from one another, and the latter could be returned to Paradise while the former would be sent to hell and there would be a distinction between friend[s] and enem[ies] [of God].³⁶

Shāhīn echoes this sentiment:

(v. 458) ...in that exalted Paradise they are all one.
There is no distinction there between enemy and
friend;
such an act is inappropriate there.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁶ Ibid.

He then concludes:

(v. 445) The grain of wheat and the snake were but a pretext...

I have yet to discover Shāhīn's source for Adam's nameless first wife. She is not found in the *qīṣāṣ* legends I have consulted. If this is indeed a reference to Lilith, as the description of her demonic nature implies, it may show Shāhīn's incomplete information about Lilith, but she may simply be a creature of his poetic fancy. In the Midrash Lilith, like Adam, was created "out of the dust of the ground."³⁷ Perhaps the detail inspiring Shāhīn's claim that Adam's first wife was made out of air is based on the Midrash that "Lilith flew away from Adam, and vanished in thin air."³⁸ Adam's longing for a mate and asking God for one is also probably of Jewish origin: "The Divine resolution to bestow a companion on Adam met the wishes of man, who had been overcome by a feeling of isolation when the animals came to him in pairs to be named."³⁹

Both Jewish and Muslim sources agree that Eve, like Adam, was exquisitely beautiful.⁴⁰ But it took a Jewish Persian poet like Shāhīn to endow her with all the charms a Persian beauty must possess; in fact, it is her beauty and Adam's complete enchantment with Eve that suggest to Iblis Adam's vulnerability through Eve.⁴¹

One of the most important details of Muslim origin in Shāhīn's account is his emphasis on the fact that Adam and Eve's "fall" was engineered by Satan/Iblis. According to the Koran, when God created Adam he asked all the angels to bow down before him. They did so, except for Iblis, who refused to

³⁷ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:65.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68; Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 31; al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 29; al-Nisābūrī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *BN*, vv. 509–514.

bow before anyone other than God. God cursed him and banished him from heaven on account of this act of disobedience. From that moment on Iblīs became Adam's sworn enemy as well as the enemy of all his progeny.

Several Muslim *qīṣāṣ* devote themselves to discussing whether or not, or how, Iblīs could have been present in Paradise at the scene of Eve's temptation because he had been expelled already after his refusal to bow down. The most imaginative of these have him flatter and deceive both a peacock and the snake in order to engage their services. Usually it is the snake who is said to have gained entrance into the Garden but when it spoke to Eve it was Iblīs who spoke through its fangs.⁴² Shāhīn does not use these fanciful details aware, perhaps, of their pitfall in suggesting that God was fooled by this form of deception. In his account the peacock is not involved; the snake does all the deceiving on its own. And Shāhīn, like the *qīṣāṣ*, emphasizes Iblīs's considerable power of persuasion which results in his obtaining the snake's enthusiastic cooperation:

(v. 555) “If you'd be able to accomplish this,
 happiness would open its gates before you.
 I will show you great favor;
 nothing is better than the work of the enemy.”
 With guile and tricks that tyrant
 seduced the snake at once.

The snake responded with warmth:

(v. 558) “...Free your heart of grief;
 turn grief and thought up-side-down.
 I will accomplish this very well;
 I will rain calamity on the head of your enemy.

⁴² Thackston, *The Tales*, pp. 37ff.; al-Tha'labi, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 30; al-Nisābūri, *Qīṣāṣ*, pp. 18–19. See also al-Tabārī, *[Tafsīr] Jāmī' al-bayān* (Beirut, 1984) 8:139–145.

Using the same tactics Shāhīn's Iblis had no difficulty persuading Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. But he accomplished this with the aid of a foreign substance, a rather extraordinary detail I was unable to discover in any source. I attribute it instead to its very likely use in Shāhīn's environment:

(v. 564) In order to lead her astray
he made an opium potion to her liking.(!)

The Midrashim have Iblis claim before Adam and Eve that God forbade them to eat the fruit of this tree so that they would not set themselves up as rivals to Him: "...ye are masters of the whole of creation, because ye were the last to be created."⁴³ But the *qīṣāṣ*, following the lead of the Koran which does not seem to differentiate between the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Life (Sura 7:20 and 20:120), perpetuate this confusion and have Iblis frighten the first couple with the likelihood of death and offering them immortality through the tasting of the grain.⁴⁴ Shāhīn seems to be aware of both traditions but he devotes only one hemistich to the Jewish aspect of Adam and Eve becoming an alternate source of power ("But he who eats from it will be another lord" [v. 576]), and like the Muslim sources, he emphasizes the possibility of immortality:

(v. 570) If you will eat from the fruit of this Garden of
Tūbā⁴⁵
you will lead a pleasant, festive, and happy life.
[You were told that] whoever eats of it dies;
he will no longer dwell in the world.
The Tree of Life bestows on him

⁴³ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:73.

⁴⁴ Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 40; al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 31; al-Nisābūrī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Yet another special tree in Paradise. The word *tūbā* derives from the Koran, 13:29: "Those who believe and do right: Joy (*tūbā*) is for them and bliss (their) journey's end." (*The Glorious Koran*, p. 185).

the honorary title of immortality.

...
 Whoever eats of it lives eternally,
 attaining all his wishes from the world.
 Eat from it that you may become immortal,
 so that your life should have no limits.

In al-Tha'labī and al-Nisābūrī, Adam and Eve are tempted together and at the same time. Shāhīn, following the biblical narrative, has Eve taste the grain and then giving it to Adam. All the sources agree that the immediate consequence was an awareness of their nakedness followed by their pathetic attempts to cover themselves.⁴⁶ When God addresses each of the culprits Shāhīn adds a moving detail about Adam that I could not find in the sources I consulted. Upon hearing God's voice Adam jumped into a tree, trying to hide, out of, he says, "great fear and dread of You." (v. 594).

In Shāhīn's epic, God punishes not only the snake, Adam, and Eve but, as we have seen, He repeats the curse of Satan as well.⁴⁷ Most of these punishments are identical with those known to us either from the biblical narrative or from Midrashim.⁴⁸ However, Shāhīn embellishes his account with a number of details that are found only in Muslim sources. For example, among the curses meted out to the snake, Shāhīn includes with other details, that God took away its beauty.⁴⁹ Al-Tha'labī also counts this among the punishments of the snake: "He [God] punished the snake with five things... He transformed her shape after she had been the most beautiful of the beasts..."⁵⁰

Shāhīn's account of the curses of Eve remains entirely within

⁴⁶ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:74–75; Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 41; al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣas*, p. 32; al-Nisābūrī, *Qīṣas*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ See above, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:75ff.

⁴⁹ BN, v. 641–646.

⁵⁰ *Qīṣas*, p. 34.

its biblical framework. Both Midrashim and *qışas* vary in their list of the ten punishments incurred by Adam,⁵¹ and none seems to make Shāhīn's connection (his original contribution to the tale?), between the fact that because he ate of the forbidden wheat he was condemned to earn his livelihood from toiling in agriculture.

Both Jewish and Muslim sources agree that Adam and Eve repented and were eventually forgiven after they were expelled from the Garden.⁵² But the manner in which this occurred differs somewhat in these sources and Shāhīn follows again, on the whole, the Muslim version of the events.

In the Midrashic narratives Adam and Eve begin by doing penance together though eventually they separate for a time while Adam fasts for forty days standing in the Jordan river and Eve does the same in the Tigris.⁵³ Shāhīn recounts that after the first parents succeeded in covering their nakedness they, along with Satan, were chased out of the Garden of Eden. Each fell to earth in a different place.⁵⁴ Adam fell in Sarandil (Sarandib in the various *qışas* sources),⁵⁵ usually identified as Ceylon. Following the honorable tradition among the Muslim authors who could not decide on the exact location of Sarandib, Shāhīn claims, like them, that Adam's footprint is still visible on the banks of the river Sihūn, better known as the Jaxartes, or Sir Darya, which, however, is located a considerable distance from Ceylon, in Central Asia.⁵⁶ He fell on a mountaintop, immediately established a place of worship, and began his penance in earnest:

(v. 684) He kept on crying, day and night;

⁵¹ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:39; al-Tha'labi, *Qışas*, p. 32.

⁵² Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:86–89; Thackston, *The Tales*, pp. 55–57; al-Tha'labi, *Qışas*, pp. 34ff.; al-Nisabūri, *Qışas*, p. 23.

⁵³ Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:87.

⁵⁴ BN, vv. 671ff.; 695ff.

⁵⁵ Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 55; al-Tha'labi, *Qışas*, p. 34; al-Nisabūri, *Qışas*, p. 20; al-Tabari, *Annales* (ed. de Goeje), (Leyden, 1879–1901), 1:120f.

⁵⁶ BN, v. 693.

his heart burned from the burden of sin.
He roamed the desert for a hundred years,⁵⁷
turning the world up-side-down.

From his copious tears, Shāhīn says,

(v. 687) there came into the world many a remedy.
From each of his pains a medicine sprang forth
as if those grasses were transmuted through
alchemy.

Al-Nisābūrī, though not claiming the tears to have been sources of remedies, recounts: “It is said that those wonderful plants like the hyacinth, saffron, aloes, and others like it that are brought from India, were originated by Adam’s waters [tears].”⁵⁸ Similarly, al-Kisā’ī claims that: “Adam wept day and night... He did not raise his head toward heaven until God had caused aloe-wood, ginger sandalwood, camphor, ambergris and all types of scents to grow from his tears. And the valleys became filled with trees.”⁵⁹ He adds: “After Adam had ceased his hundred years’ weeping, some of his tears remained on the earth, and the birds and beasts drank from them. His tears had a fragrance like that of musk, which is why there is so much perfume in India.”⁶⁰ His penance was fully accepted, according to Shāhīn⁶¹.

All the sources devote much less space to Eve’s penance which seems to have been similar to that of Adam. Shāhīn has her walking by the river Anjil but the *qīṣāṣ* sources generally claim that she fell in Jidda, in Arabia.⁶² After a year of penitence, while walking about, she suddenly met Adam again, and Shāhīn says:

⁵⁷ The period of one hundred years is mentioned by al-Kisā’ī (Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 55) and al-Tha’labī (*Qīṣāṣ*, p. 35).

⁵⁸ *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 55.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶¹ See above, p. 9.

⁶² BN, v. 687; Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 55; al-Tha’labī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 39; al-Nisābūrī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 20, al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 1:12f.

(v. 701) Adam rejoiced on seeing Eve;
 a cry arose from both their hearts.
 they embraced each other,
 kissing each other's eyes and head.
 They praised the Living Invisible One,
 the God of the sun, moon, and of the heavens.
 They rejoiced in their union
 like rose buds that announce the spring.

This is a brief and simplified version of a reunion which, in the accounts of the *qīṣāṣ* took place in and around the Ka'bah.⁶³

The analysis of this episode has most likely not exhausted the strands of sources interwoven in Shāhīn's epics. However, it should make it clear that they are by no means exclusively Jewish. Although it can be argued that Muslim *qīṣāṣ* often preserve variations on Jewish Midrashim, and that the ultimate reservoir for such tales may very well be Jewish, this analysis shows that Shāhīn was acquainted with them in their Muslim form. Such a conclusion raises important questions about Shāhīn's work and about his milieu. The fact that he borrowed material, consciously or unconsciously, from his Muslim (Sunni)⁶⁴ neighbors suggests a high level of acculturation comparable, perhaps, to the state Spanish Jews experienced in their Golden Age. Elsewhere I have pointed out that the ease with which he borrowed may well have been due to his, and perhaps his coreligionists', involvement with Sūfism, the mystical movement of Islam; this could explain a more relaxed

⁶³ Thackston, *The Tales*, p. 61; al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 39; al-Nisābūrī, *Qīṣāṣ*, pp. 22–23. Al-Nisābūrī elaborates a lovely detail found only briefly in al-Tha'labī (*ibid.*). He says that Adam and Eve did not recognize each other so altered by grief, tanned, and weather beaten they were. The angel Gabriel had to come down and tell Adam that he was looking at Eve. That is why that place is known as 'Arafat (derived from 'arafa, 'to know,' hence [place of] 'recognition').

⁶⁴ It is not yet clear to me whether this is an important distinction, that is, whether once Iran became a Shi'i country in 1501, the increasing intolerance of religious minorities would have dampened Jewish enthusiasm for such borrowing.

attitude regarding the tales and sources common to both Judaism and Islam.⁶⁵ However, this possibility still needs to be investigated and remains difficult to prove. Furthermore, the fact that Shāhin's epics maintained a high, if not the highest, status in the literary canon of Persian Jewry throughout the centuries, even during periods of persecutions,⁶⁶ clearly suggests that Iranian Jews were profoundly attached to their environment. I reached the same conclusion based on a study of Judeo-Persian miniature paintings⁶⁷ in which I found Jewish biblical heroes depicted wearing typical Muslim costumes, acting in stereotypical Muslim ways.

Finally, the question of the epics' function should be addressed. Did Shāhin envisage them as a type of commentary on the Pentateuch, a function often given to them by later Iranian Jews, or did he create them purely as works of literature? The boundaries may have been blurred for his contemporaries. His epics possess none of the characteristics of traditional commentaries, (i.e., verse-by-verse elucidations, linguistic explanations, the citing of earlier authorities, etc.). To us they appear to be primarily works of literature. From what we perceive of Shāhin's erudition he undoubtedly knew the difference between commentary and literature. Because he seems to have viewed his work as the latter he did not feel troubled by his borrowing from "foreign" sources. He was merely doing what countless Jewish authors have done before and after him: retell the stories of the Pentateuch for his contemporaries in the most effective

⁶⁵ I propose this hypothesis in the article cited in n. 11.

⁶⁶ Bābāi b. Lūtf, the seventeenth-century Judeo-Persian chronicler, author of *Kitab-i Anusī* ['The Book of a Forced Convert'] mentions his name with reverence. See W. Bacher, "Les Juifs de Perse au xvii^e et au xviii^e siècles d'après les chroniques poétiques de Babai b. Loutf et de Babai b. Farhad, *REJ* 51 (1906): 129.

⁶⁷ Vera B. Moreen, *Miniature Paintings in Judeo-Persian Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1985).

contemporary style available.⁶⁸ His models were the great epics of Iranian literature, such as the *Shāh Nāmah*, and thus in his effort to "raise" the narratives of the Pentateuch to their level Shāhīn felt free to use not only the literary techniques of his environment but its sources of legends, Jewish and Muslim, as well.

⁶⁸ Joseph Dan, *Ha-sippur ha-'ivri*, pp. 20–23, chap. 6, and chap. 15.



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VERA BASCH MOREEN

Moses, God's Shepherd: An Episode from a Judeo-Persian Epic

STUDENTS OF JEWISH LITERATURE would find it difficult, I believe, to identify the hero and the episode that are the subjects of the lovely miniature painting on page 108. It bears many of the principal iconographic features of the exquisite art of Muslim miniature paintings: a hero in Muslim garb whose head encircled by a glorious flaming halo instantly identifies him as a holy man; lively animals, a lion, two mountain goats, and a flock of lambs, depicted so realistically that they appear to leap off the page; a natural background of rocks and trees whose animated shapes echo the action of the picture; the sun, part of the audience at the combat, by no means more glorious than the hero's flaming halo. . . . Add to these features the lovely blend of colors, primarily gold, green, burnt orange, and pink, and you would be hard put not to claim this painting to be a fine example of a Persian miniature in the popular style. However, the text above and below the picture, in Hebrew letters, indicates—and is the sole indicator—that the miniature has some connection with the Jewish world. It does indeed: this painting illustrates an episode from the Judeo-Persian epic *Müsâ Nâmah* of Shâhîn written in the first half of the fourteenth century. The hero in the illustration is none other than Moses. The miniature depicts one of his combats with a wild beast, in this case a lion, while Moses was a shepherd in Jethro's employ.¹

Moses' life is described in loving detail by many postbiblical sources, apocryphal, pseudepigraphical, and midrashic. To these rich embellishments, hardly allowing of a lacuna, a number of startling and imaginative details can be added that seem to have originated among Muslim Qur'ân

But I will no longer talk of what is past;
Nor will I dwell on past sins.

Give me my share of these sheep,
O chosen Kalim, Lion of God."



From *Mūsa Nāma* by Shāhīn, ca. 1686.
© Israel Museum and used by permission.

When the glory of heroes heard this,
He said: "O black faced one, turn back!
These have been entrusted to me;
one cannot act treacherously toward them."

commentators and especially among Muslim storytellers. Such are the details surrounding Moses' adventures as a shepherd; they seem to be entirely the product of Muslim imagination. However, through that process of unabashed cultural borrowing and aesthetic adaptation which characterized Jewish life in the Muslim world of the Middle Ages, these details found their way into an epic written by a Persian Jewish poet. Just as the painters of Judeo-Persian miniature paintings (and it cannot be determined whether they were Jews or Muslims) saw nothing reprehensible in depicting biblical heroes using the iconographic clichés of their craft, Shāhīn, whose chief literary oeuvre consists of a versification of the Pentateuch in classical Persian meter and classical Persian rhetoric, felt free to borrow from his Muslim neighbors those tales and embellishments that seemed to enhance his narrative. This illustration is then, like the epic from which it is taken, a powerful symbol of the successful symbiosis, not assimilation, attained by Iranian Jews in their native environment.

The voluminous and exciting research of S. D. Goitein and his students has shed much light on the Muslim influence on Jewish life around the Mediterranean, an influence that was far from being limited to the aesthetic and literary realms. Similar effort to investigate the less well known world of Iranian Jewry also has the potential of being highly rewarding. This study, concentrating primarily on a specific episode from one of the most interesting Judeo-Persian epics, also aims to introduce readers to the broader context of these epics and to the questions raised by their study.

The literary legacy of the Jewish sojourn in Muslim Iran is known as "Judeo-Persian" literature. Written in the Hebrew alphabet but in the classical Persian language,² this body of texts is still found mostly in manuscript form and remains largely unexplored, scattered in public and private collections throughout the world.³ Their provenance covers the vast regions of the Persianate world but their chronological sweep is more limited. The surviving specimens are relatively late, dating mostly from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Equally enormous is the range of their contents including commercial documents, Bible translations, prayers and religious poetry, versifications of rabbinic works, liturgical compositions, dictionaries and grammatical works, transcriptions of classical Persian poetry, original epics, chronicles, secular poems, texts on magic, kabbalah, and folk tales. A substantial number of Judeo-Persian texts has found its way even into the Cairo Genizah. Most of these texts have yet to be investigated.

Cyrus Adler and Yitzḥak Ben-Zvi were the first to collect Judeo-Persian manuscripts and reveal their value. Wilhelm Bacher, Max Seligsohn and Walter J. Fischel soon published a number of vital pioneering

studies.⁴ Nevertheless, the work of cataloging these collections and providing critical editions has lagged far behind. Despite a number of recent studies this is a field of Jewish scholarship in which much remains to be done.⁵

Of the many areas yet to be explored in the Judeo-Persian corpus are original epics created by Iranian Jewish poets who were influenced both by the extraordinarily rich epic tradition of Iran and by biblical and midrashic literature. These Judeo-Persian epics, like the most famous national epics of Iran, have inspired the creation of miniature paintings. Unlike the best Persian miniature paintings, which are the products of royal workshops, the Judeo-Persian miniatures that illustrate some of the manuscripts of Judeo-Persian epics are in the popular Iranian style.⁶

There are two major poets whose works fall into the category of great Judeo-Persian epic poetry; their study would greatly enrich the Jewish literary heritage. They are Mawlānā Shāhīn-i Shirāzī (fourteenth century) and 'Imrānī (1454–after 1536). This study focuses on a single section of Shāhīn's epic *Mūsā Nāmah*, the episode devoted to Moses' years of service as Jethro's shepherd, in order to gain a more detailed sense of the epic's texture. A short biographical sketch of the poet is followed by some general remarks on the manuscripts, content, and style of the *Mūsā Nāmah*. The account of the episode is then followed by a discussion and analysis of the story and by comments regarding the nature of Shāhīn's epic.

As his *nisbah*, or adjective denoting place of origin, indicates, Shāhīn hails from Shirāz, the capital of the province of Fars and one of the loveliest cities of Iran. In Shāhīn's day it must have been a fairly thriving place despite the turbulence caused by the rivalries of its Il-Khanid rulers (descendants of Genghis Khān) that lasted until the city fell to Timūr (Tamerlane) in 1393.⁷ We have no exact dates for Shāhīn's life. However, in accordance with the Muslim poetic custom of praising the reigning monarch who was sometimes a poet's patron as well, chapter four of the *Mūsā Nāmah* is devoted to praising Sultān Abū Sa'īd (r. 1316–36), one of the most memorable Il-khanid rulers of Shirāz.⁸ There is no reason to believe that Abū Sa'īd was Shāhīn's direct patron because these verses of praise are couched in general flattering terms. And we simply do not know enough about fourteenth-century Iranian Jews to be able to speculate on whether or not a Jewish poet could have had access to the ruler. Placing Shāhīn in the first half of the fourteenth century means bestowing upon him the honor of being an older contemporary of Iran's greatest lyrical poet, Hāfiẓ (ca. 1320–1388), who also flourished in Shirāz. As of now, no link can be established between the two poets.

No other reliable biographical information about Shāhīn is available to us; we can infer the adulation of his contemporary and later coreligionists who preserved his work for centuries.⁹

Shāhīn's epic, the *Mūsā Nāmah*, is one of the earliest works of Judeo-Persian literature. Although Shāhīn does not seem to have named the epic some Judeo-Persian scholars refer to it by this title.¹⁰ The *Mūsā Nāmah* is, without a doubt, one of the most interesting and most original works of Judeo-Persian literature. Composed around 1327 it consists of approximately ten thousand verses set in classical Persian meter.¹¹ The content of the epic is based on a selection of episodes from the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The *Mūsā Nāmah* is part of a larger cycle of epics written by Shāhīn known as the *Sharh-i Shāhīn*, or "Shāhīn's Commentary" on the Torah. The full epic cycle includes also large parts of the books of Genesis, Esther, and Ezra.

Several western libraries possess full or partial manuscripts of Shāhīn's epics;¹² some are illustrated with lovely miniatures.¹³ The number of the surviving manuscripts testifies to the popularity of Shāhīn's epics among Iranian Jews.

Although Shāhīn's biblical epics have been noted, described briefly, and excerpted, there exists only one detailed study of a small part of his Esther epic, *Ardashir Nāmah*.¹⁴ The best full length study of all Shāhīn's epics is still Wilhelm Bacher's ground-breaking book *Zwei jüdisch-persische Dichter Schahin und Imrani* (Budapest, 1907). As the title indicates, it also discusses the poetry of 'Imrānī, Shāhīn's later imitator. Until a modern critical edition of Shāhīn's work is undertaken we rely mostly on an edition published in Jerusalem in 1902 by the Bokharan rabbi Shim'on Hakham.¹⁵

For the sake of convenience and because other scholars such as Wilhelm Bacher and Amnon Netzer have already done so, I also refer here to Shāhīn's versification of parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as *Mūsā Nāmah*. His treatment of Genesis, or *Bereshit Nāmah*, is usually discussed separately as a self-contained epic.

Walter J. Fischel, one of the pioneering students of Judeo-Persian literature, claims in his short entry on Shāhīn in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* that Shāhīn's purpose for writing the epics was "to promote a deeper knowledge of the Jewish past."¹⁶ Although this cannot be doubted, even a cursory glance at *Mūsā Nāmah* reveals Shāhīn's purpose to have been more complex: the meter (*hazaj mussadas makhzūf* [- --- / - --- / - --]), language, and imagery he employs are intended to embellish and elevate even more the content of the biblical tales. How much more elevated can the rhetoric of Scripture be, one may well ask? For Shāhīn, the answer was obvious: the Torah could and should reach the heights of the Persian literary classics; he aimed to do just that. Shāhīn imitated in earnest the rhetoric, and as far as possible the style, of the two greatest models of Persian epic literature, the *Shāh-Nāmah*, or "Book of Kings," of Firdowsī, the beloved national epic of Iran created around 1010, and the *Khamsa*, or "Quintet," of Niẓāmī (d. 1209), the most popular romantic cycle of epics of

Persian literature. To what extent he succeeded in that goal which, I might add, he shared with many Muslim poets in the Persianate world, remains to be determined.

In his epic Shāhīn does not versify everything and is little tied to the *peshat*, or literal meaning, of the Torah. He appears to omit the legal parts and chooses to dwell on those sections of the biblical narratives which recount clearly defined stories and heroic deeds. His approach shows no interest in the philological or grammatical aspects of the Hebrew language. He is neither translating the Torah nor commenting on it in a traditional manner. He is merely setting to verse certain parts of it. Although he follows the divisions of the *parashot hashavua'*, he is not strictly bound by them. Shāhīn's main interest seems to lie in midrashic interpretation. He shows familiarity with several midrashic sources.

From his Muslim neighbors Shāhīn borrows more than just the Persian language. The narratives of *Mūsā Nāmah* interweave freely information found in various Muslim sources. The nature and identity of Shāhīn's Muslim sources needs closer scrutiny.¹⁷ He seems to be familiar with some basic qur'ānic stories, especially as these came to be transmitted in the popular genre known as *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, or "legends about prophets."¹⁸ One of his principal Muslim sources may have been Tabarī's great history (*Tā'rikh*) and his equally great qur'ānic commentary (*Tafsīr*). He appears to have used several *qīṣāṣ* sources as well. The great epics that have influenced him, the works of Firdowsī and Nizāmī mentioned above, also convey some *qīṣāṣ* literature and they, rather than the written *qīṣāṣ* collections directly, could have been Shāhīn's principal Muslim sources. In fact, he may have relied entirely on the oral transmission of popular stories rather than on written sources, a possibility that needs careful investigation. These complex strands and influences remain to be unravelled in detail even if Wilhelm Bacher already showed the way eighty years ago.

Nestled between the chapters describing Moses' sojourn in Midian, his marrying Zipporah, and the chapters describing the oppression of the Jews in Egypt, and Moses' experience at the Burning Bush, there are three chapters (194 verses; [Hakham ed., fols. 44v–48r]), comprising essentially one episode. They describe in vivid language Moses' extraordinary fidelity to the flock entrusted to him by Jethro.

In the first chapter Moses, armed solely with his staff leads the flock to a pasture in a plain at the foot of a mountain. His gaze is alert, ever watchful for straying sheep. At the foot of the mountain he suddenly sees a frightening serpent huge, dark, with many arms and claws.¹⁹ He addresses Moses politely calling him "Lion of God" (*shīr-i yazdān*), and demands a share of the lambs. Outraged, Moses, tells him that the sheep are in his safekeeping and one cannot consume or derive benefit from something one holds in trust.²⁰ The serpent continues to demand his

share, confident that no one can go past him. But one blow from Moses' staff ends his arrogance. Moses decapitates the serpent, flings the head into the desert, and returns cheerfully to his flock. Unhampered by the geography and flora of the Sinai Peninsula, he finds a magnificent pasture especially prepared for him by God:²¹

Beyond that mountain and cave,
Moses, the exalted wise man,
Found a lovely, delightful spot where
Anemones and jasmine smiled revealing teeth,
A delicate pasture, with water and greens;
None has ever seen such a choice place.
Tulips and roses unveiled their visage;
The nightingale sat happily before the rose.

5 Violets opened their eyes cheerfully
Beginning to flirt with the plane tree,
The lily reviled the tulip,
Shedding red blood into its goblet,
The drunken narcissus bowed its head
Capturing the cypress in jest,
The zephyr combed the jasmine's curls
Turning blossoming buds into butterflies,
Sweet basil wafted hyacinth powder
Rousing wild beasts in their lairs,

10 Pretty colored birds arrived in flight;
Sometimes at peace with one another, sometimes at war.

The trees were in concert²² from the New Year's breeze;
The meadow victorious from the Almighty's deeds.
Mountain, earth, and desert turned green
Like emerald chips—by the command of the Most Generous,
Deer, wild ass, and gazelles strutted
Everywhere, like a flowing stream;
Everywhere beautiful springs flowed
As lovely as eternal paradise.

15 Water rolled down like pearls from the rocks;
Parrots sang melodies and told stories.
The prophet with the sheep looked around;
When he saw such a choice spot he smiled.

The sheep were intoxicated by water and grass,
Each one ensnared by such goodness.

Moses then returns to Jethro. (Throughout the episode Jethro is called by his Muslim name, Shū‘ayb, just as Moses is often called Kalim, based on his qur’ānic epithet, *Kalīmallāh* [Spokesman of God].) His father-in-law comes out to meet him expressing uncommon love and concern for his son-in-law. Calling him “chosen child” (*biguzidah farzand*), he inquires about the difficulties Moses encountered that day. Moses replies that he longed to see Shū‘ayb; he makes no mention of the conflict with the serpent.

The second chapter in the episode is similar to the one just described.²³ With the arrival of a new day Moses and his flock head to a new pasture. They come upon a beautiful meadow, strewn with flowers, traversed by a stream. Shāhin lets loose his penchant for hyperbole when it comes to descriptions of nature (a most respectable penchant among Persian poets), and declares the meadow reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. He also refers to it as *rowže-i riżwān* (the garden of *Riżwān*), Arabic/Persian words denoting the Muslim paradise. This peaceful plenitude is suddenly disrupted by the flight of a flock of gazelles and ewes running down the slope of the nearest mountain. A dreadful stone rolls down behind them. And soon after a ferocious wolf appears armed with a huge branch. Upon noticing the sheep in the plain he is overjoyed, saying to himself that today will be a festival day for him. He leaps, and only then notices Moses whose imposing figure casts fear into his heart at once. He greets Moses, and addressing him as *shīr-i jabbār* (“lion of the Almighty”) and “Kalim,” he also demands a portion of the sheep. Moses refuses and tries to calm the animal’s frenzy. He reminds the wolf: “How can one deal treacherously towards what one has in safe keeping?” (*amānat-ra khīyānat chūn tavān kard?*) Calling him *payghambar-i pāk* (“pure prophet”), the wolf claims that if Moses refuses to give him his share willingly, he will take it by force:

...“O pure prophet,
There is no wolf as nimble and quick as I.

Whether you give or not, I will take;
Game like this I will not leave alone.”

Having said this he snatched a lamb
And took a few steps toward the desert.

When the Prophet saw the wolf’s leap,
He ran after him like a flying arrow.

5 Like lightning he reached the nape of his neck;
He grabbed the wolf and tore him apart.

Having rescued the lamb from the wolf
He came toward the flock, cheerful and happy.

He sheared the lamb’s wool with scissors
And, that exalted one, twisted it tight.

He twisted a strong rope from it
And tied it firmly around the wolf's neck.

Like a thief, he hung him from the gallows;²⁴
That virtuous man meted out his punishment.

10 The rescued lamb trembled afar;
He escaped lightly from the wolf's claws.

The Prophet came and kissed it on both eyes,
Saying: "O, newborn one,

God set you free from the claws of death
And reacquainted you with life."

Then Moses sets the lamb free among its companions and they continue to graze. Once the flock is sated, Moses gathers the sheep and heads homeward to Shū'ayb who is waiting for him anxiously. As soon as Shū'ayb sees him he heaps praises on Moses "with [all his] his heart, tongue, and soul."

The third episode, the denouement of the story, deserves to be quoted in full:

HOW KALIMALLĀH KILLED THE LION IN THE DESERT

Once again that exalted one, that treasury
Of mysteries, carried the sheep to the pasture.

Staff in hand, Moses headed toward the plain;
The sheep all gathered before him.

Again, into that smiling rose garden
Kalimallāh led forth his sheep.

He gathered them from everywhere, mountain and plain,
To pasture after pasture, stream after stream.

5 The earth, mountain, and plain were fresh;
Everywhere tulips and roses were intimate.

The sheep grazed in desert and plain,
They ran among hyacinths and roses.

The prophet walked behind them staff in hand
And drunk with the Invisible.²⁵

He shamed the moon itself with his appearance.
Suddenly, a roar reached his ears.

He spotted a black lion²⁶ from afar
Coming forward full of pride.

10 Loudly he roared, rushing forth
Like lightning in sleet.

He was at war with Fortune, mountain and plain;
Every moment he struck rocks with his tail.

Violently he struck these rocks
Smashing them into pieces.

He tore hard stones with his claws;
Tossing them with his chest into the road.

Panting he came like a drunken elephant,
Rising and falling, pulling himself along.

15 His eyes, two bowls of boiling blood;
Paw striking lip, drunk, and stupefied.

By chance his eyes fell on the prophet;
By God's decree his fury abated.

Quickly he came before the prophet;
The flocks huddled on seeing him.

He greeted Moses, saying: "O chosen one,
The Merciful One created you for Mercy.

The pasture is mine, both plain and game;
Here I hunt nightly for my dinner.

20 Here not a bird can fly,
Nor a dragon graze;

Hundreds in this valley and summit
Obey my command, O best of creation.

All the wild beasts fear me;
Were one a lion he'd turn into a fox.

When you came into this valley without my permission
And saw such a delightful pasture,

You opened the road wide,
And set the sheep loose.

25 But I will no longer talk of what is past;
Nor will I dwell on past sins.

Give me my share of these sheep,
O chosen Kalim, Lion of God."

When the glory of heroes heard this,
He said: "O black faced one, turn back!

These have been entrusted to me;
One cannot act treacherously toward them."

The lion said again: "O exalted prince,
May happiness be your slave and good fortune your friend,

30 Be generous, give me some of these;
Look well at my neck, shoulders and arms.

I am a black lion, a black lion am I
 The blow of the sword rivals not the tip of my claw.

The strength and fury of my arms, claws, and teeth,
 Will not leave one of these sheep alive."

When Kalim heard this from that accursed one,
 And saw him so proud of himself,

He said: "O dirty Gebr,²⁷
 You're a lion of the thicket, I am the lion of the Almighty."

35 In anger Moses grasped his staff and struck him
 On the chest so that he turned to flee.

He seized the lion, hauling him overhead;
 Then struck him to the ground and smashed his body.

When the prophet killed that wild beast,
 The black lion, in glorious combat,

He thanked the Judge profusely,
 Saying: "O Almighty, Displayer of Might,

O Knower of Aeons, You have shown me
 generosity, grace, and goodness,

40 Therefore a frenzied and drunken black lion
 Have I laid low with one blow!

Mountain and plain cried out on his account;
 He acted unjustly toward every wild beast."

Having thus thanked God the prophet
 Moved on with the sheep.

As soon as he heard his voice
 Shu'ayb came forth from his place.

He came strutting at once from his tent
 Toward that elite one of the palace.²⁸

45 The sheep surrounded him [Shu'ayb] running,
 Rubbing his feet all around.

Famous Shu'ayb did not glance at them;
 He was overjoyed at his reunion with Moses.

He rubbed his hands on the sheep's backs;
 All had gained weight—he was happy.

He said to Moses: "O pure pearl, may the garments
 Of your ill-wishers be torn by grief!

Tell me, O Lion of God, where
 Did these sheep become so fat?

50 I know of no grass in this desert;
 Resolve this mystery for me."

He answered: "O great prince,
 May each of your days improve forever,
 May you endure as the light of the sun;
 May the Merciful One watch over you in everything."

Then that exalted, beloved cypress,
 Imparted mysteries to Shu'ayb for three days.

Everything he had kept under veil
 He revealed, one by one, to that wise man.

55 He told Shu'ayb the story of the serpent,
 The wolf, and the bloodthirsty lion—from beginning to end.

Shu'ayb was amazed by his deeds
 And heaped praises on his body and soul.

Thus did Moses pass time as a shepherd,
 keeping watch in mountain and plain.

Many nights did he spend in the plain,
 Staff in hand, walking around the flock.

He slept not but like the revolving spheres
 He circled continually around the sheep.

60 The exalted one of mountains and plains
 was with the sheep day and night, night and day.

There is a definite *crescendo* in the episode; each combat is more difficult than the last. Moses acquires himself brilliantly in all three. Just as he is adamant about protecting his flock he does not hesitate in the least to punish the wrongdoers. He wastes few words with them and dispatches them quickly. The outcome of the combats is never in question for Moses not only possesses a magic weapon, his staff, but the beasts clearly recognize him as God's champion. Despite the odds, they are determined to challenge Moses; or, more likely, God determines their behaviors for His own purposes. Moses, on his part, at the end of the third combat, thanks God for all the victories, thus acknowledging that it was God, not his own valor, that has saved him.

What can we make of this three-chapter episode? What are its literary sources? What is its dramatic function in the epic? Does it enhance it or does it detract from it? Curiously, Wilhelm Bacher, whose pioneering study contains many perceptive comments about Shāhīn's epics, attaches little or no importance to these chapters. Intent on discovering (but not exhausting) the midrashic as well as non-Jewish sources used by Shāhīn he closes himself off to the dramatic function of this episode. He states: "Shāhīn's narrative regarding Moses' adventures as a shepherd, the slaying of the dragon [serpent], the wolf, and the lion, are not, to my knowledge, found anywhere,"²⁹ and leaves the matter at that. He is right

as far as most Jewish sources are concerned.³⁰ But at least two Muslim sources do refer to these encounters even if not in Shāhīn's full description. In the fanciful *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* of al-Kisā'i, written possibly before the tenth century,³¹ we find Shu'ayb sending Moses to a specific pasture, saying:

Here is a valley which has very good pasture, but for a large serpent that devours all sheep that pass by. So Moses took on Shu'ayb's flock, which then numbered forty head, and set out for that valley. When the serpent perceived the sheep, it went out in search of them; but Moses struck it with his staff, cutting it in two. When he returned to Shu'ayb and told him of the serpent's death, the old man rejoiced. Then the flock increased in number to eighty, then one hundred and fifty; and every year his flock increased until it numbered four hundred head. . . .³²

Both Jewish and Muslim sources dwell at length on the unusual magical qualities of Moses' staff, which he uses as a weapon in all his encounters.³³ While I cannot go into these here, suffice it to mention one source in which the qualities of the staff are combined with characteristics reminiscent of Shāhīn's descriptions in this episode. In his *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* al-Tha'labī (d. 1036) relates that when Shū'ayb finally let Moses have the staff and sent him on his way to pasture the flock, he said:

"Go with these sheep and when you reach the crossroad bear left, not right, even if there is more grass there because an enormous snake lives there who will frighten you and the sheep." So Moses went with the sheep until he reached the crossroad but turned right, trying to turn the sheep toward the north; he was unable to do so. Then he went to sleep while the sheep were up, grazing.³⁴ Suddenly the snake appeared. The staff stood up, engaged it in battle, killed it, and returned to lie down at Moses' side. However, it was bleeding. When Moses woke up he saw the bleeding staff, the serpent killed, and he realized that this staff was powerful and possessing dignity. This had been Moses' wish when he [first] held it in his hands. And when he threw it [in the air] he saw that it changed into a serpent, the largest possible snake, pitch black, moving on all fours, . . . gnashing its teeth, spewing forth tongues of flame . . . his eyes flashing like lightning, exhaling a poisonous odour, burning everything in sight, passing by rocks like a big-humped she-camel, swallowing them, until they rattled in her abdomen, shattering trees with his teeth, wrecking and swallowing them, kicking and twisting as if looking for [more] to devour. This was the strongest of serpents, possessed of the lightness of the *jinn* and the flexibility of a snake. . . .³⁵

Classical Persian epics abound in descriptions of ferocious beasts and dragons who challenge heroes to use their wits and martial skills to the utmost.³⁶ And this is exactly why Shāhīn provides a similar set of combats for Moses. No Persian hero can be spared such trials; thus Shāhīn subjects Moses to trials worthy of a Persian epic hero. Actually, compared with similar models in Persian literature, Shāhīn's descriptions show both

imagination and restraint. Playing with the motif of the faithful shepherd who is as careful with a real flock of sheep as he will be later with his flock of Jews, Shāhīn includes this episode to highlight some of Moses' heroic features: he is kind, fearless and, above all, law abiding. Under no circumstances is he tempted to sacrifice part of his flock for the whole. Mindful, as it were, of the fact that both Jewish and Islamic law enjoin the strict preservation of anything placed in trust, he is unwilling to give the beasts even one little lamb. The fate of one lamb concerns him as much as the fate of the entire flock.

Moses' relationship with Shū'ayb and his flock reveal the mystical dimensions of the episode. In fact, at first glance, one is inclined to see here nothing more than another expression of the Kabbalistic motif embodied in the famous *Ra'ya Mehemna*, or "Faithful Shepherd" theme.³⁷ There is no denying that the motif is present in Shāhīn's epic; its spirit is very much akin to the description found in the *Zohar*:

As the shepherd tends with special care the newly-born lambs and carries them in his bosom, or gently leads them after their mother, and is compassionate with them, so must Israel's shepherd be compassionate with them, so must Israel's shepherd be compassionate and not cruel. Thus Moses said: "Thou sayest unto me, Carry them in thy bosom" (Num. 11:12). As the good shepherd saves the sheep from wolves and lions, so does the good shepherd of Israel save them from pagan nations, from judgement here below and from judgement above, and prepares them for the life of the world to come. Just such a faithful shepherd was Moses, and the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that he would shepherd Israel as he shepherded Jethro's flock, the males as they required, and the females likewise according to their needs. Moreover, Moses "tended the flock of Jethro," not his own sheep, though he must have possessed some, for, as R. Jose remarked, "Jethro was a rich man, and, surely, he must have given his son-in-law sheep and cattle!" Yet he did not tend his own sheep, for then people might have said, "he treats them so well because they are his own." Although Jethro was a "priest of Midian," that is to say, a pagan, yet because he was kind to Moses, the latter served him well and tended his flock with all due care in good and fat pasture.³⁸

The phrases, "as the good shepherd saves the sheep from wolves and lions," and "because he [Jethro] was kind to Moses, the latter served him well and tended his flock with all due care in good and fat pasture," neatly summarize two of the principal themes of our episode.

However, despite the affinity of the motifs, the link to the *Zohar* is tenuous. *Mūsā Nāmah* as a whole is not directly aware of the *Zohar* even if it is acquainted with midrashim that have found their way into it. This is not surprising since the *Zohar*, completed around 1290, did not become well known to Oriental Jewry until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the development some two centuries after Shāhīn's life, of Lurianic Kabbalah.

Although similar to the kabbalistic theme just mentioned, the mystical dimension of this episode is primarily *Ṣūfi*. Shāhīn's description of Moses' relationship with Shū'ayb and some of the technical *Ṣūfi* words he employs are sufficient to endow the episode with a light, sophisticated *Ṣūfi* veneer, the type present in some measure in all Persian classical poetry. Let me elaborate.

At the end of the first day Shū'ayb asks Moses whether he encountered any difficulties in the desert. Perhaps Shū'ayb knew of some, as Tha'labī's *Qīṣāṣ* indicates. Nevertheless, despite his profuse expression of love, he allows Moses to return to places full of danger. Does he do so unknowingly, or because he knows that Moses must be tested? In some manuscripts it is only after his victorious third return that Moses wins the hand of Zipporah in marriage, and only after that does he meet God at the Burning Bush. It would seem that Shū'ayb's role is prepared by God and that his feelings for his prospective son-in-law are multifaceted. Some of the Muslim sources, for instance, endow him with actions usually attributed to Laban in Jewish sources. Like Jacob, Moses is made to work for Shū'ayb anywhere from ten to forty years, until he wins Zipporah, and like Jacob, he is rewarded with a flock of a certain color when his service is over.³⁹ In this episode, as when Moses has to "win" the staff from him, Shū'ayb seems to play the role of a trying *Ṣūfi pīr*, a mystical teacher testing the spiritual mettle of his *murīd* (disciple). Moses is an obedient student until, at the end of the third episode, in a wonderful reversal of roles, he becomes the *pīr* imparting mysteries to Shū'ayb—among them the mystery of his survival in the three combats.⁴⁰ The *Ṣūfi* coloring of the episode is reinforced by the use of words such as *sama'* and especially by the explicit reference to Moses' state of intoxication with the *lā-makānah*, "the Invisible," a technical *Ṣūfi* term denoting God.⁴¹ The psychological thrust of the episode, the concept of "taming beasts," is highly *Ṣūfi* in nature even if it is a common motif of all heroic literature. This accords well with Jewish sources which also view Moses' life as a shepherd as a test:

And Moses was a shepherd, as the Torah [says]: "God tests the righteous" (Ps. 11:5). Rabbi Yitshaq said: "What did He test the righteous with? With pasturing. David was tested with pasturing, as it is said, 'from behind pregnant ewes He brought him to pasture' (Ps. 78:71). Amos was tested with pasturing, as it is said: 'And God took me from behind the flock' (Amos 7:15). Even Moses was tested with pasturing; he was a shepherd."⁴²

Shāhīn's language is replete with words and imagery culled from classical Persian poetry. The descriptions of the beautiful pastures in which Moses grazes his flock echo the language of Firdowsī and especially of Nizāmī in whose poetry every pasture is full of colorful flowers and murmuring streams.⁴³ The descriptions are even more effective when one considers that in Shāhīn's poetry these pastures are in the arid land of

Midian. The transformation of the desert is yet another divine favor God grants his special shepherd. Shāhīn's vocabulary also suggests to trained ears that Moses' prowess is reminiscent not only of the feats of such pre-Islamic heroes as Rustam and Iskandar in the *Shāh Nāmah* but of Muslim heroes as well, including Muḥammad and 'Alī. The use of words and adjectives such as *payghambar-i pāk* ("the pure prophet"), *khāṣ* ("special, favored"), *shir-i yazdān* ("lion of God") are strong reminders of similar epithets in Islamic literature connected with the persons of Muḥammad and 'Alī. This vocabulary was part of Shāhīn's milieu; it belonged to the accepted clichés of the Persian language of his day. It seems clear then that the dramatic function of the episode, as reinforced by its vocabulary, does not rest merely in displaying Moses' physical prowess but rather in highlighting the spiritual rung he attained through yet another set of tests. These proved further that he was worthy and ready for still higher deeds: the encounter at the Burning Bush and the Exodus itself. Shāhīn's innovative use of an undeveloped Jewish theme, which he couched in Sūfi language and imagery, is a superb example of the poet's sensibility to both his heritage and his literary environment.

Some Christian scholars have claimed that the biblical stories about Moses are less about the man than about God.⁴⁴ This perspective provides a good explanation for the profuse midrashic preoccupation with "fleshing-out" most aspects of Moses' life. Shāhīn continues this tradition but in a peculiarly Iranian way. With a keen sense of building Moses in the mold of a Persian epic hero and with the help of Muslim sources, Shāhīn here fills in a "lacuna" in the midrashim about Moses. He does so with skill, using the Persian language and imagery of his age, employing not only some of the Sūfi vocabulary of Persian classical poetry but also the general thrust of Sūfi tales.⁴⁵ For his audience, faithful to Jewish tradition yet steeped in Persian culture, this must have been a wonderful feat indeed. In Shāhīn's hands Moses becomes more than a great Jewish hero. He becomes the quintessential Persian hero as well, the equal in physical prowess of Rustam and Iskandar of the *Shāh Nāmah*, and vying with Muḥammad and 'Alī in spiritual strength.

This analysis of a short episode raises some important questions about the literary and historical position of Shāhīn's epics in the double contexts of Iranian and Jewish history and literature. Since it combines two literary traditions, the epic tradition of Iran and the Jewish tradition of retelling biblical tales that has flourished from antiquity to the present, it is necessary to untangle as much as possible the specific strands that form this web of influences and to determine how they interplay in Shāhīn's epics.

Iranian Jews over the centuries endowed these epics with a quasi-commentary status. The title of the epic cycle, *Sharḥ-i Shāhīn*, claims that it is a commentary; one of the meanings of the word *sharḥ* in both Arabic and Persian is "commentary." However, this title was not Shāhīn's own; it was bestowed by Shim'on Hakham around the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that it reflects an older, possibly much older, perception. Still, I have found no evidence thus far to indicate that Shāhīn intended them as commentaries rather than mere epics imitating the great epics of Persian literature. Nor can I at this stage do more than speculate about when and why Shāhīn's biblical epics may have passed from being regarded as purely literary works to works endowed with almost religious status. It would be tempting to date such a hypothetical transition to the period of the advent of the Safavid dynasty, after 1501, when Iran changed, mostly by force, into a Shī'i kingdom. But we lack concrete evidence for such a claim thus far. It is well known, however, that Iran's change into a Shī'i nation eventually brought about more strained relations between its Muslims and non-Muslims, including the Jews, relations that culminated in the periodic persecution of the Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁶ Perhaps it was during these difficult times that Iranian Jews, isolated from outside contacts and showing signs of general cultural decline, came to venerate, beyond their aesthetic merit, the literary accomplishments of Shāhīn, whose accomplishments they tried but were unable to emulate.⁴⁷ Although many commentaries of the Torah are known for their inclusion of "extraneous" materials that reveal the concerns of their authors and the intellectual trends of their times, Shāhīn's free borrowing of Muslim tales and even of Muslim religious vocabulary, makes these epics rather strange as Jewish commentaries on the Torah.⁴⁸ Lacking traditional features of commentaries such as word-by-word explanations, the elucidation of thorny biblical passages, or the conveying of new interpretations, Shāhīn's epics, in my view, can best be appreciated if regarded as literary works based on and inspired by the Torah.

If, then, Shāhīn's biblical epics are primarily literary works, readers familiar with Jewish but not with Persian literature might hasten to assume that they belong to the venerable branch of Jewish literature known as the "Rewritten Bible."⁴⁹ This view is not, of course, incorrect. Though not directly related to them, Shāhīn's biblical epics are in the tradition of ancient Jewish literary creations that have sought not only to reinterpret but to retell biblical narratives as well, such as the *Book of Jubilees* (ca. second century B.C.E.), the *Genesis Apocryphon* (late first century B.C.E. or first half of the first century C.E.) of the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (eighth century), and *Sefer hayashar* (thirteenth century). Even a cursory glance at these compositions, however, written

primarily in Hebrew and Aramaic, reveals that while Jewish authors have reveled in the use of biblical allusions and have been inspired by biblical tales they generally did not recast such tales into the vernacular language of the people among whom they dwelt. (Here I am using the word "vernacular" not in its primary meaning in opposition to "classical or learned" languages, but rather in its secondary meaning, "expressed or written in the native language of a place, as literary works."⁵⁰) When we think of great writers who have done so we think of Christian authors like Milton and Racine, and more recently Thomas Mann and Pär Lagerkvist. There are simply no Jewish writers of equal stature who have accomplished the same. For the earliest surviving example of such works we have to turn to the hellenistic period, to the work of Ezekiel, a Jewish writer of tragedies, who wrote a play in Greek entitled *Exagoge* (Exodus). Written sometime between the second and first centuries B.C.E., Ezekiel's play, a part of which has been preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica* (IX, 28–9) quoting Alexander Polyhistor,⁵¹ was inspired not only by biblical accounts but also by the language of the Septuagint, and above all, by Greek drama.⁵² In fact it is primarily in the hellenistic world that we find the literary tendency to remold biblical heroes in a fashion comparable to Shāhīn's efforts. Louis H. Feldman has shown convincingly in a series of articles that Josephus (admittedly a historian and not a poet, therefore not an exact parallel to Shāhīn) strove to reconcile the images of the great biblical heroes with hellenistic views of heroism.⁵³ While examples of premodern recastings of biblical tales in Hebrew are more numerous⁵⁴ this only serves to heighten the exceptional nature of Jewish literary works based on the Torah written in the vernacular. Perhaps the most numerous examples come from Yiddish literature where a host of works such as *Shmuel-bukh* and its imitators are close retellings of biblical stories.⁵⁵

The Jewish content of Shāhīn's epics is never in doubt despite his borrowings from the Muslim milieu. Already Wilhelm Bacher noted that the epics are suffused with allusions to rabbinical literature, the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, Targum Ps.-Jon., and especially midrashic works such as *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Sefer hayashar*.⁵⁶ Despite this fact readers familiar with classical Persian poetry will find Shāhīn's epics a fair example of that tradition. Readers familiar with both Jewish and Iranian classics would have difficulty deciding which tradition is dominant in Shāhīn's poetry. Their decision may well hinge on that ancient, treacherous, and ultimately unresolvable literary controversy regarding which is more important, content or form. Shāhīn's epics are primarily Jewish in content and completely Persian in form. There is little doubt in my mind that this creative combination was exactly the chief source of delight for his audiences. Written in flawless classical Persian verse accessible even to unlettered Iranians, Muslims and Jews alike, by virtue

of the fact that classical Persian poetry was widely known through oral recitations, and interspersed with midrashim and Muslim tales similarly familiar to his aural audiences, Shāhīn's biblical epics were indeed a unique "recasting of the Bible in a Persian garden."⁵⁷ However, like most of the works that belong to the genre of the "Rewritten Bible," I perceive Shāhīn's epics to contain an implicit message which, in my view, tilts the weight of literary influences on his epics toward the Persian side. Built in the mold of Persian heroic and romantic epics, they seem to wish to "elevate" the content of the epics to similar heights; they seem to wish to convince their Jewish as well as Muslim audiences that Jews have an equally great tradition if only *told* the right way. . . .

There is little doubt in my mind that in order to write in the language and style in which he did Shāhīn must have felt very much at home in Iran and he must have been well versed in and very fond of Persian literature. This literary observation raises some important historical questions. Did Shāhīn and his contemporaries, still living in a Sunnī Iran, feel markedly different from their coreligionists, who, as mentioned above, experienced Iran's consolidation into a Shi'i realm? Lacking substantial Muslim or Judeo-Persian historical documents from Shāhīn's time,⁵⁸ can we use his epics in a more historical fashion to discover how the Iranian Jews of an earlier era might have fared? Will the epics reveal information that would help us substantiate the prevailing view that the turbulent Mongol and post-Mongol periods have been kinder to Iranian Jews?⁵⁹ And, finally, what may we legitimately deduce and what may we not from the Muslim, especially Sūfi vocabulary present in Shāhīn and in many other Judeo-Persian works, about the nature and extent of Jewish Iranian involvement with Sūfism?

I have no answers to these questions as yet but they seem interesting enough for me to continue to probe Shāhīn's language and imagery for clues that might help determine not only the literary value of his epics but also, in the absence of other documents from his period, the historical dimensions of his Jewish environment.

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NOTES

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1. The miniature and its context are described more fully in my *Miniature Paintings in Judeo-Persian Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1985), p. 44.

2. There are a number of Persian dialects characteristic of some Iranian Jewish communities but these are not reflected in the vast majority of the texts. On these dialects,

see G. Lazard, "La dialectologie du Judeo-Persan," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 8 (1968): 77; idem, "Note sur le jargon des Juifs d'Iran," *Journal asiatique* 266 (1978): 251-55; Ehsan Yarshater, "The Hybrid Language of the Jewish Community of Persia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97 (1977): 1-7; idem, "The Jewish Communities of Persia and Their Dialects," in *Memorial de Jean de Menasce*, Ph. Gignoux and A. Tafazzoli eds., (Louvain, 1974), pp. 453-466; and *Jewish Languages, Themes and Variations*, Herbert H. Paper, ed., (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 103-19.

3. In the U.S. the largest Judeo-Persian collection of manuscripts is at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, followed by the collection of Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. In Israel the largest collections are at the Ben Zvi Institute and the Jewish National Library, Jerusalem. Both the British Library, London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, possess small collections. The Leningrad Library of the U.S.S.R. has a totally unexplored collection. There is no way at present to estimate the number of manuscripts that may be privately owned by Jews in Iran and elsewhere.

4. Most of these works are mentioned by Amnon Netzer in the Introduction to his *Montakhab-i ash'är-i fārisī az āsār-i yahudiyān-i Irān* [An Anthology of Persian Poetry of the Jews of Iran] (Tehran, 1973), pp. 9-71. For a summary on Judeo-Persian language and literature in English we must still turn to Wilhelm Bacher's entries in the old *Jewish Encyclopedia* 7:313-324, and W. J. Fischel's in the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 2.

5. Among these one can cite Amnon Netzer's *Montakhab* (see above, n. 4) and several other studies by him cited in that work; David Yeruoshalmi's "The Judeo-Persian Poet 'Emrāni and His Ganj-Nāme," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1986), and two of my own studies cited below in n. 46.

6. See my *Miniature Paintings in Judeo-Persian Manuscripts*.

7. A. J. Arberry, *Shiraz; Persian City of Saints and Poets* (Norman, Okla., 1960), pp. 47-54.

8. Arberry, *Shiraz*, pp. 49-53. For the correct identification of this ruler, see W. Bacher, "Der jüdisch-persische Dichter Molla Schahin," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 16 (1903-04): 600-1, where he corrects M. Seligsohn's erroneous identification put forth in "The Hebrew-Persian MSS. of the British Museum," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (1903): 286-87.

9. One source of possible information has been overlooked so far. In accordance with a Persian literary practice dating at least to the twelfth century, at the end of each chapter the poet addresses a few admonitory verses to himself using a pseudonym. This rhetorical device is known as *takhallus* or *nom de plume* verses (see Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* [Dordrecht, 1968], p. 99). The pseudonyms were usually borrowed either from the name of a patron or were based on an outstanding characteristic of the poet. In these verses Persian poets often revealed something of their philosophy and, at times, of their circumstances. Although couched in vague and general terms, it is possible to obtain some concrete information from such verses as studies of Hāfiẓ's poetry have shown. See Michael C. Hillman, *Unity in the Ghazals of Hafez* (Minneapolis, 1976).

10. See the works of Amnon Netzer and Wilhelm Bacher cited below.

11. Wilhelm Bacher, *Zwei jüdisch-persische Dichter Schahin und Imrani* (Budapest, 1907), p. 8; Amnon Netzer, *Montakhab*, p. 37; idem, "A Judeo-Persian Footnote: Shāhīn and 'Emrāni," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 258; idem, *Otsar kitvei hayad shel yehudei Paras bimakhon Ben-Zvi* (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 28.

12. To cite only a few: ms. 2101, Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati); ms. 180/54, Israel Museum (Jerusalem); ms. or. Oct. 2885, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin); mss. 1067, 4568, 4584 and part of 978, Ben Zvi Institute (Jerusalem) (these last four are listed and described in A. Netzer's *Otsar*); and ms. Or. 4742 of the British Library (London). A comprehensive list of all available manuscripts remains a desideratum and a first step towards the compilation of a critical edition of the epics.

13. The first three manuscripts cited in note 12 are illuminated. They are described in my *Miniature Paintings*, pp. 43-48.

14. A few chapters of the *Müsä Nāmah*, transliterated in Persian script, have been published by A. Netzer in his *Montakhab*, pp. 9–57. A fuller study of the *Ardashir Nāmah* was made by Dorothea Blieske in her doctoral dissertation "Šahine Šrāzīs Ardšīr-Buch" (Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Tübingen, 1966).

15. R. Shim'on Hakham published the "Moses Book" and the "Book of Genesis" together under the title *Sefer Sharh-[i] Shahin 'al ha-Torah*. In 1910 he published Shāhin's versification of the Book of Esther under the title *Sefer Sharh-[i] Shahin 'al Megillat Esther*. (See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [Jerusalem, 1971], 14:1258). Interspersed with the Moses epic, R. Shim'on Hakham published his own running commentary on the parts of the Torah covered therein. He also named his own work *Müsä Nāmah*. Herbert H. Paper published this commentary recently (*The Müsä-nāma of R. Shim'on Hakham* [Cincinnati, 1986]). The nature of its relation to Shāhin's epic remains to be determined.

16. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 14:1258.

17. At first glance Shāhin does appear to be following the traditional divisions of the *parashot hashavu'*. Still, his choice of the material he includes and excludes requires further study; Bacher, *Zwei Dichter*, pp. 105–17.

18. *Qisāṣ* literature can be defined briefly as folk-type tales dealing with episodes in the lives of Old and New Testament prophets which are not necessarily described or alluded to in the Qur'ān. These tales became popular in the Muslim world beginning with the middle of the seventh century and were collected in written form by several compilers between the tenth and twelfth centuries. See W. M. Thackston's Introduction to his *Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisāṣi* (Boston, 1978).

19. The Persian word *azhdar* (dragon) is used in the title of the episode only; the rest of the time the beast is referred to as *mār* (serpent, snake).

20. It is not clear from the epic what type of responsibility Moses felt towards Jethro with regard to the latter's flock. According to one midrash (*Exodus Rabbah* 1.40, [Midrash Rabbah (New York, n.d.)]), Moses had to swear to Jethro that he would not leave him the way Jacob had left Laban. Only after this oath did Jethro allow Moses to marry Zipporah. Moses' part of the marriage agreement consisted of his becoming Jethro's shepherd:

(מ) ווֹאֵל מֹשֶׁה, רַי אָוֹר שָׁנְבָבָעַ לְ. וְאֵין ווֹאֵל אֶלְאֶל שְׁנָבָבָעַ לְ. אֶת הָעֵם. וְלִמְהָה הַשְׁבִּיעוֹ אֶל יְהוָה אֲנִי שִׁיעַב אֶבְיַם כְּשַׁנְתִּין לְ בֶן בְּנֹתֵי נְתָלֵן וְהַלְּךָ לְ חַזְׁן מְדֻעַתּוֹ שֶׁמְאָם אָמַת נְתָן לְךָ אֶת בְּתֵי אֶתְּהָ עֲשָׂה לְ בָנָה. מִיד נְשָׁבָעַ לְ וְנְתָן לְ אֶת צְפֹרָה. וּרְבִי נְהִמְיָה אָמַרְוּ קָבַל עַלְיוֹ לְלֹן עַמּוֹ וְאֵין ווֹאֵל אֶלְאֶל שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁנָא' (שׁוֹפְטִים יט) הוֹאֵל נָא וְלָנִי. וּרְבּוֹתִינוֹ וְלִי אָמַרְוּ קָבַל עַלְיוֹ לְלֹעֲתָה אֶת צָעָנוֹ וְאֵין ווֹאֵל אֶלְאֶל לְשֹׁתְתָה תְּחִלָּה כִּיּוֹ שְׁנָשָׁא בְּתוֹתְתּוֹ וְקָבַל עַלְיוֹ לְרַעֲתָה אֶת צָעָנוֹ.

From the above one would assume that this "transaction" made Moses a *shomer sakhar*, or a "paid bailee," fully responsible for his father-in-law's flock. (See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14: 1455–58, s.v. "Shomerim," and the sources cited there.)

A standard Muslim reference in a different context is al-Bokhari's (d. 870) *al-Sahīl*. In the French translation of O. Houdas, *Les traditions islamiques* (Paris, 1906), 2: 113–22, esp. p. 122: "Le serviteur, pour le bien de son maître, est un berger; il lui sera demandé compte de son troupeau."

21. Hakham ed., 44v–45r. The numbering of the verses and the translations are mine. These translations are intended to acquaint readers with Shāhin's thoroughly Persian imagery and rhetoric deserving of an independent study. Like the Persian poets he is emulating, Shāhin's poetry is replete with descriptions of nature (see Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, *La description de la nature dans la poésie lyrique persane du XIe siècle* [Paris, 1969]), metaphors, similes, and as in the passage cited here, personification, as well as other rhetorical embellishments characteristic of Persian verse (Joseph Garcin de Tassy, *Rhétorique et prosodie des langues de l'orient musulman* [Amsterdam 1970; reprint of 1873 ed.]).

22. Pers. *samāt*, "music and dance." This is a technical term in Šūfism (Islamic mysticism) denoting one of the means through which Šūfis seek communion with God.

23. This chapter is transcribed and translated by M. Seligsohn (based on Ms. Or. 4742 of the British Library) in his article "The Hebrew-Persian MSS.," pp. 292-94, 298-301 respectively. The differences between his translation and mine highlight the need for a critical edition of this epic.

24. Hanging is not the usual punishment of a thief either in Jewish or Muslim law.

25. Pers., *mast-i lā-makānah* ("drunk with the No-Place"). This is another Sūfi term for the intoxication of the mystic in the throes of union with God ("the Invisible," "the Placeless").

26. These verses suggest that black lion may be a panther. The text, however, refers mostly to *shīr* ("lion"), rather than *siyāh shīr* ("black lion"). The painter of the miniature also understood the beast to be a plain lion. The adjective "black" may well refer here only to the lion's character. The Persian word for panther is *palang* and it is never used in this story. However, the existence of some type of black lion has been noted in the early Middle Ages in areas as far flung as Ethiopia and India (see Jean Bodin's *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* [New York, 1966], p. 87, and E. Ullendorff and C. F. Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John* [Oxford, 1982], pp. 42 and 78). I am indebted to Dr. David Goldenberg for these references.

27. Embracing the prejudices and literary conceits of his Muslim Iranian neighbors Shāhīn's Moses calls the lion a "Gebr," or Zoroastrian, a derogatory term referring to the most despised group in contemporary Iranian society.

28. The epithet refers not only to Moses' royal upbringing but also, and most likely primarily, to his special spiritual rank in the celestial palace.

29. Translation mine; W. Bacher, *Zwei Dichter*, p. 95, n. 2.

30. L. Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols., (Philadelphia, 1969 reprint) contains no references to this episode. But in *Pirke-de Rabbi Eliezer*, an eighth-century aggadic collection that seems to have borrowed some Muslim legends, we find the following:

Moses was keeping the sheep of Jethro for forty years, and the beasts of the field did not consume them, but they increased and multiplied exceedingly. . . . (*Pirké de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. and annotated by Gerald Friedlander [New York, 4th ed., 1981]).

For a thorough analysis of *Pirke-de-Rabbi Eliezer* see Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot vetoldoteyhen* (Jerusalem, 1974), chap. 12.

In *Exodus Rabbah* (ca. 900-1000) 2.2ff., we find that Moses was kind and gentle with his flock, characteristics amply borne out by our episode. These were, in fact, the characteristics that qualified him, in God's view, to become Israel's shepherd. *Exodus Rabbah* 1.3 also mentions that Moses was very careful to prevent his flocks from grazing on fields that did not belong to Jethro. He therefore led his sheep deep into the desert. Similarly, in *Yalqut Shim'onī* (Jerusalem, 1977), remez 167, we are told that he led his flock into the desert to avoid [being tempted by or becoming the target of] *gezel* (robbery, embezzlement). This concern with legal propriety is also illustrated by our episodes where Moses is unflinching in his care for Jethro's flocks.

31. The dating of al-Kisā'i's life and work is still controversial. The latest conclusions are in Aviva Schussman's study, *Sippurei hanevi'im bemasorat hamuslemit* (Jerusalem 1981), pp. 3-8 [Hebrew], VIII-X [English].

32. W. M. Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'i* (Boston, 1978), p. 223. On the same page there is another indirect reference to our episode. When Moses prepares to leave Shu'ayb the latter tries to detain him on the pretext that he is old and weak and still in need of a shepherd. Moses replies: "Your flocks do not need a shepherd, for I have made a pact with the wolves and lions that they cause no harm. . . ." The miraculous increase of the flock, just like Moses' life as a shepherd, has many elements borrowed from the legends associated with Jacob.

33. References to Moses' magic staff, how he acquired it, its origins and characteristics, and how he used it, are too numerous to cite here. For Jewish sources, see at least the references cited in L. Ginzberg's *Legends*, vol. 7, Index under "Moses, Rod of." For Muslim

sources, see al-Kisā'i in *The Tales*, p. 222, al-Nishāpūri's (ca. 1100) *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* (Tehran, 1961), pp. 161ff., and al-Tha'labi's (d. 1036) *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* (Cairo, n.d.), pp. 188ff.

34. Since Muslims place much less emphasis on the "faithful shepherd" aspect of Moses, al-Tha'labi, unlike Shāhīn, does not portray him as eternally vigilant.

35. al-Tha'labi, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 190 (my translation).

36. See, for example, the famous battles of Rustam with the white elephant, and the *dīv* Akhvan in Firdowsi's, (*Shāh Nāmah* [Hyderabad, 1849] 1: 129–36. See also R. Levy tr., *The Epic of the Kings* [Chicago, 1967], pp. 48–49 and 146ff. and Bahrām Gur's battle with two lions in Nizmī's *Haft Paykar* [Tehran, 1351 solar (1972)], pp. 658–59). A striking parallel between the battle waged by Moses' rod and the serpent is the battle waged by Rakhsha, Rustam's horse, with the lion while Rustam was asleep. (Firdowsi, *Shāh Nāmah*, 1: 128.)

37. Gershon Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1987), pp. 162 and 170 respectively.

38. The *Zohar* trans. by H. Sperling, M. Simon and P.P. Levertoff (London, 1970; reprint of 1934 ed.), 3:68–69.

39. al-Nishāpūri, *Qīṣāṣ*, p. 158.

40. Jewish sources also refer to Moses as a revealer of mystical doctrines (L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, p. 414, n. 109). See also Daniel J. Silver, ch. 8, "Moses and the Kabbalah," *Images of Moses* (New York, 1982), pp. 263–86.

41. The phrase occurs frequently in the poetry of the celebrated Persian mystic Jalāl al-Din Rūmī (d. 1273). For example:

*hamchū roughan dar miyān-i jān-i shīr
lā makān andar makān āyad hamī*

"Just as fat rises in milk
the Invisible manifests itself."

(*Kulliyāt-i Shams*, ed. by Bādi' az-Zamān Firouzanfāri [Tehran, 1340 A.H. (1921)]), 2: 171, *ghazal* #2897.

The use of Sūfi vocabulary in Judeo-Persian texts raises important questions about the extent of Jewish acquaintance with Iranian Sūfism. These questions need further investigation. See my "The Muslim Vocabulary of the *Kitāb-i Sar Guzasht-i Kāshān* of Bābāi ibn Farhād," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1985): 375–84.

42. *Yalkut Shim'onī* (Jerusalem, 1977), 3.1.

43. See for example, the beautiful description of a feast in spring in *Nizāmī's Haft Paykar*, pp. 205–206.

44. Dewey M. Beegle, *Moses the Servant of Yahweh* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972) pp. 347–48 and Gerhard von Rad, *Moses* (London, 1960) pp. 8–9, both cited in George W. Coats' *Moses, Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield, 1988), pp. 13 and 32.

45. See for example the tales about the trials and tribulations of Sūfi saints and mystics in Farid al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, parts of which have been translated by A. J. Arberry in his *Muslim Saints and Mystics* (London, 1973; reprint of 1966 ed.).

46. These persecutions are described in two surviving Judeo-Persian chronicles. They are the *Kitāb-i Anusī* [The Book of a Forced Convert] of Bābāi ibn Lutf (written ca. 1662) and the *Kitāb-i sar guzasht-i Kāshān dar bāb-i 'ibri va-goyimi-yi sānī* [The Book of Events in Kāshān Concerning the Jews; Their Second Conversion] by Bābāi ibn Lutf's grandson, Bābāi ibn Farhād, written ca. 1731. I have published a study of the first chronicle, *Iranian Jewry's Hours of Peril and Heroism* (New York, 1987), and my critical edition and annotated translation of the second chronicle has just been published as *Iranian Jewry during the Afghan Invasion* (Stuttgart, 1990).

47. See my discussion of the styles of the two chronicles mentioned in note 46, *Iranian Jewry*, pp. 37–50 and *Iranian Jewry during the Afghan Invasion*, pp. 6–7.

48. See also my articles "The Legend of Adam in the Judeo-Persian Epic *Bereshit Nāmah* (14th Century)," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, forthcoming; "A

Dialogue between God and Satan in Shāhin's *Bereshit Nāmah* (14th century)," delivered at "Irano Judaica: Second International Conference on Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture," Jerusalem, July, 9–12, 1990, and due to be published by the organizers of the conference.

49. For a more thorough study of this genre see Joseph Dan's *Hasippur ha'ivri bimey habeynayim* (Jerusalem, 1974), especially pp. 20–23 and 133–36.

50. *The American College Dictionary* (New York, 1963).

51. G.M. Sifakis, *Studies in the History of Hellenistic Drama* (London, 1967), pp. 122 ff. and n. 5.

52. Yehoshua Gutman, *Hasifrut hayehudit hahelenistit* (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 9–69.

53. See, for example, his "Abraham the Greek Philosopher in Josephus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 99 (1968): 143–45; "Hellenization in Josephus' Version of Esther," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 101 (1970): 143–170; "Josephus' Portrait of Saul," *Hebrew Union College* 53 (1982): 45–49; "Josephus' Portrait of Jacob," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79 (1988–90): 101–151.

54. Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature* (New York, 1975), 6:175–177; 8:201 ff.

55. See the exhaustive treatment in Khone Shmeruk, *Sifrut yiddish: Peraqim letoldoteha* (Tel-Aviv, 1978), chap. 4, especially pp. 117–136.

56. *Zwei Dichter*, pp. 83–105.

57. A felicitous expression from one of the anonymous referees of this study.

58. In fact the only strictly historical documents written by Iranian Jews that have come to light thus far are the two Judeo-Persian chronicles mentioned in note 46.

59. Walter J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (London, 1937), pp. 90–125.



The "Iranization" of Biblical Heroes in Judeo-Persian Epics: Shahin's Ardashīr-nāmah and 'Ezrā-nāmah

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The “Iranization” of Biblical Heroes in Judeo-Persian Epics: Shahin’s *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *‘Ezrā-nāmah*’

JUDEO-PERSIAN LITERATURE IS ONE OF THE MOST NEGLECTED AREAS OF both Jewish and Iranian studies. Although Judeo-Persian texts—New Persian documents in the Hebrew alphabet—date as far back as the second half of the eighth century and constitute, in fact, the first recorded texts in New Persian, they are still largely unexplored for two major reasons.¹ First, most Judeo-Persian texts are available only in manuscript form, and these manuscripts are located in largely uncatalogued library collections.² Second, the study of Judeo-Persian manuscripts requires a thorough knowledge not only of several languages (Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic) but also of Judaism and Islam in their respective religious and secular literatures.

Strides have been made in the study of Judeo-Persian texts since the late-nineteenth century.³ Nevertheless, much remains to be done, especially in the

‘This study is a revised version of a presentation made at the annual meeting of MESA, Washington, D.C., December 1995.

1. For early Judeo-Persian texts see Bo Utas, “The Jewish Persian Fragment from Dandan-Uiliq,” *Orientalia Suecana* 17 (1968): 123–36; G. Lazard, “Remarques sur le fragment judéo-persan de Dandan-Uiliq,” in W. Sundermann, J. Duchesne-Guillemin and F. Vahman, eds., *A Green Leaf: Papers in Honor of Professor Jes P. Asmussen*, *Acta Iranica, hommages et opera minora*, vol. 12 (Leiden, 1988), 205–209; Shaul Shaked, “Judeo-Persian Notes,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 178–82. See also Gilbert Lazard, *La Langue de plus anciens monuments de la prose persane* (Paris, 1963), 31; Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, 1968), 148–49.

2. The following are the extant catalogues of Judeo-Persian MSS: E. Spicehandler, “A Descriptive List of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts at the Klau Library of the Hebrew Union College,” *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 8 (1968): 114–36; J. Rosenwasser, *Judeo-Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, offprinted (with additional indices of persons and titles) from G. M. Meredith-Owens, *Handlist of Persian Manuscripts, 1865–1966* (London, 1968), 38–44. Rosenwasser’s list has now been updated by Vera B. Moreen, “A Supplementary List of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts,” *The British Library Journal* 21 (1995): 71–80; A. Netzer, *‘Otsar kitve ha-yad shel yehude paras be-makhon Ben Zvi* [‘Manuscripts of the Jews of Persia in the Ben Zvi Institute’] (Jerusalem, 1985). Dr. E. Wust is currently preparing a catalogue of the Judeo-Persian MSS held in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, and Vera B. Moreen will catalogue the Judeo-Persian manuscripts of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. The core of this collection, to which other manuscripts have been added over the years, consists of the manuscripts purchased by E. N. Adler. See his *Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Collection of Elkan Nathan Adler* (Cambridge, 1921).

3. A recent, albeit incomplete, bibliography can be found in Netzer, *‘Otsar kitve ha-yad*, 59–69.

realm of editing texts, the first and most important step toward their comprehensive study. Until more scholarly editions are prepared, our studies cannot help but be preliminary in nature. Judeo-Persian texts include a large variety of genres, such as Bible translations, religious and secular poetry, chronicles, rabbinical works, grammatical treatises, translations of medieval Hebrew poetry, transcriptions of classical Persian poetry and original epics. These Judeo-Persian texts have the potential to refine our knowledge of the received texts of classical Persian poetry and to expand the parameters of Persian epic literature, respectively.

In many ways Judeo-Persian literature is comparable to other bodies of Persian literatures that flourished in the Persianate world and completely outside the boundaries of Iran (i.e., in the Ottoman and Mughal empires) in that it adopts Persian topoi and rhetorical modes of expression and adapts them to indigenous themes. The literary techniques through which this is achieved in the specific case of two original Judeo-Persian epics, Mawlana Shahin Shirazi's *Ardashīr-nāmah* (The Book of Ardashir) and *‘Ezrā-nāmah* (The Book of Ezra), is the topic of the present study.⁴

In order to emphasize the uniqueness of Shahin's epics, it is relevant to note at the outset that the writing of epic poetry has not been characteristic of Hebrew and Jewish literature in general. Although the Hebrew Bible treats many epic themes (i.e., the story of the Flood, the superhuman deeds of Samson, and so on), and it includes epic rhetoric in its vast poetic arsenal (i.e., God's reply from

4. For studies of Shahin's epics see Jes. P. Asmussen, "Judeo-Persica I. Šāhīn-i Šīrāzī's *Ardašīr-nāma*," *Acta Orientalia* 28 (1964): 243–61; Ezra Spicehandler, "Šāhīn's Influence on Bābāī ben Loṭf: The Abraham-Nimrod Legend," in S. Shaked and A. Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1990), 158–65; Vera B. Moreen, "Moses, God's Shepherd: An Episode from A Judeo-Persian Epic," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 107–130; idem, "The Legend of Adam in the Judeo-Persian Epic *Bereshit* [Namah] (14th Century)," *PAAJR* 57 (1991): 155–78; idem, "A Dialogue between God and Satan in Shahin's *Bereshit* [Namah]," in Shaked and Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1994), 127–41; idem, "Ishma‘iliyat: A Fourteenth Century Judeo-Persian Account of the Building of the Ka‘ba," forthcoming in a festschrift in honor of W. Brinner. See also Dorothea Blieske, "Šāhīn-i Šīrāzīs Ardašīr-Buch" (Ph.D. diss., Eberhard-Karls Universität, Tübingen, 1966), 49–50. Other than Blieske's, there are no complete studies of Shahin's individual epics. The only comprehensive, yet much too sketchy, study of Shahin's entire oeuvre remains Wilhelm Bacher's *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter Schahin und Imrani* (Strasburg, 1907). See also Amnon Netzer, *Montakhab-i ash‘ar-i Fārsī az āsār-i Yahūdiyān-i Īrān* (Tehran, 1352 Sh./1973), Introduction (pp. 37–40), and texts (pp. 9–178); idem, "Otsar kitve ha-yad, 27–29. Shim‘on Hakham published the Judeo-Persian texts of *Mūsā-nāmah* and *Bereshit-nāmah* under the Hebrew title *Sefer sharh-i Shahin ‘al ha-Torah* (The Book of Shahin's Commentaries of the Torah) (Jerusalem, 1902–1905), and in 1910 he published the Judeo-Persian text of *Ardashīr-nāmah* under the Hebrew title *Sefer sharh-i Shahin ‘al magillat Esther* (The Book of Shahin's Commentaries on the Scroll of Esther). These are not critical editions in the modern sense of the term. Blieske's study contains 22 edited chapters of the *Ardashīr-nāmah* (pp. 45–84), her translation into German of these chapters (pp. 85–144), and a synopsis of the remainder (pp. 145–86). Netzer does not specify the manuscript background of the texts he includes in his anthology (*Montakhab*). Therefore, the most urgent desideratum for the study of Shahin's epic remains establishing critically sound editions.

the whirlwind in the Book of Job), no modern literary critic would venture to characterize it as an epic. The Hebrew Bible contains many narratives that fit a current definition of an epic,⁵ but its heterogeneity, both of content and genres, precludes any such conception.⁶ It is perhaps the Hebrew Bible's "ideology," its penchant for and preoccupation with "religious intent," which, in turn, "involves an absolute claim to historical truth" and severely restrains, or subordinates, the "representative imagination" of biblical sources, that most distinguishes it from the great epics of Eastern and Western civilization.⁷

The Hebrew Bible is, of course, the source of inspiration for a highly diverse body of literature produced by Jewish and non-Jewish authors throughout the ages. While the retelling of biblical tales in Hebrew and vernacular languages flourished in the diaspora,⁸ the actual creation of epics based on biblical themes is rather small.⁹ Not surprisingly, when these do appear in the European setting, they are heavily indebted to local, non-Jewish (chiefly medieval Germanic) epics.

It is difficult to imagine how the content of the Book of Esther, a highly dramatic narrative placed in an Iranian setting, can be made to appear even more Iranian. Yet that is exactly what happens to it in the hands of the most accomplished of the Jewish poets of Iran, Mawlana Shahin Shirazi, who flourished in the fourteenth century, during the reign of the Ilkhanid Abu Sa'īd (1315–35) whom he eulogizes in two panegyrics.¹⁰ Unfortunately, not much more is known about his life. Even his full name eludes us. It is not clear whether "Shahin" is the poet's first name or his *takhalloṣ* (*nom de plume*).¹¹ His place of origin is

5. ". . . a long narrative poem that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war and a conquest, or a heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the tradition and beliefs of its culture" (A. Preminger et al., eds., *The New Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [Princeton, 1993], s.v. "epic").

6. See the works of Robert Alter, especially *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985), and *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York, 1992).

7. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in idem, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), 14; Harold Fisch, *Poetry with A Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988).

8. Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, 12 vols., trans. and ed. Bernard Martin (New York, 1975), 6:175–77; 8:201 ff.

9. Most of these examples come from Yiddish literature, from works such as *Shmuel-buch* and its imitators. See Chone Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish: perakim le-toldoteha* (Tel Aviv, 1978), ch. 4, esp. 117–36. Jewish epics on non-biblical themes are even less frequent. An unusual example is the retelling of the Arthurian cycle. See *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, trans. and ed. Curt Leviant (New York, 1969).

10. Netzer, "Otsar kitve ha-yad," 28, n. 32. The panegyrics are found in Chapter 5 of *Ardashir-nāmah* and Chapter 3 of *Mūsā-nāmah*.

11. Because "Shahin" is a common Persian name, Bacher inclines to the former view. While some Persian poets are known to us by other names than their given ones (e.g., Sa'īdi), most Persian poets are known to posterity either by their *takhalloṣ*, which often refers to their occupation (e.g., 'Attar, Hafez), or, even more frequently, by their place of origin (*nisbah*), such as Nezami Ganjavi (Bacher, *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter*, 7–8).

also somewhat in doubt, although the *nisbah* “Shirazi” and Babai b. Lutf’s reference to his grave in Shiraz¹² appear to settle that dispute.¹³ Even though all of Shahin’s surviving epics are based on biblical characters, scenes, and themes, he transposes them in ways that yield characters, scenes, and even themes typical of Persian epic poetry. How does he (and less successfully, his later imitators) achieve this? Is it possible to distinguish specific narrative “techniques” that contribute to the overall “Iranization” of biblical themes? This introductory study proposes to look at four such techniques that seem to play a crucial role in this process of transmutation.

The four narrative techniques most responsible for Shahin’s “Iranization” of biblical narratives can be defined as: (1) descriptive passages of man’s natural and man-made environment; (2) amplification of the action beyond the biblical narrative through the addition of details from different sources, such as Jewish legendary lore (*midrash*), Muslim legendary lore or “tales of the prophets” (*qisas al-anbiyā’*), and purely imaginary details; (3) endowing biblical protagonists with stereotypical characteristics of heroes and heroines in Persian epics; and (4) inserting direct didactic comments on the fates of these heroes, or indirect ones, through their dialogues and speeches, mostly revealing a thoroughly Sufi outlook on the world.

It is undoubtedly due to the influence of the local Iranian epic tradition, which predates the advent of Islam in Iran, that some Iranian Jews of the Islamic period were inspired to create their own epics.¹⁴ From among them Shahin should be considered the poet laureate of the Judeo-Persian literary tradition. This study centers primarily on the *Ardashir-nāmah*, perhaps Shahin’s most inspired epic. It is partly a retelling of the Book of Esther, but, as we shall see, it is much more than that. Together with its “appendage,” *‘Ezrā-nāmah*, which is loosely based on the prophetic books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it forms perhaps Shahin’s most ambitious—certainly his most complex—work. *Ardashir-nāmah* was written in 1333, at the height of the poet’s creative powers, and it employs one of the more complex variants of the *hazaj* meter (*hazaj-e mosaddas-e akhrab-e maqbūz-e mahzūf*).¹⁵ Among Shahin’s Persian versifications of biblical themes it was preceded by *Mūsā-nāmah* (Book of Moses), written in 1327,¹⁶ and

12. *Kitāb-i anūsī* (The Book of a Forced Convert), an important Judeo-Persian chronicle from the middle of the seventeenth century; see the introductory chapters. No edition of this chronicle has yet appeared. For a comprehensive study of the *Kitāb-i anūsī* see Vera B. Moreen, *Iranian Jewry’s Hour of Peril and Heroism: A Study of Bābāī Ibn Luīf’s Chronicle [1617–1662]* (New York, 1986).

13. Bacher, *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter*, 9–10; Netzer, *Montakhab*, 37. Hakham records that in the view of some people, Shahin lived in Kashan (see his Hebrew Introduction to *Bereshit-nāmah*, p. 6).

14. William L. Hanaway, “Epic Poetry,” in E. Yarshater, ed., *Persian Literature* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), 96–108.

15. Bacher, *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter*, 9 gives the date 1332. See also Netzer, *Montakhab*, 38–39; idem, ‘Otsar, 28–29.

16. Bacher, *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter*, 8; Netzer, ‘Otsar, 28; idem, *Montakhab*, 37, gives the erroneous date of 1317.

followed by *Bereshit-nāmah* (The Book of Genesis), which was composed in 1358 and appears to be the last of Shahin's known epics.¹⁷

In no other Judeo-Persian epic is the desire of the Jewish poets of Iran to link their literary and historical tradition to that of their homeland as obvious as in *Ardashir-nāmah*. Here the poet explicitly ties together the fates of the two nations, Jews and Iranians, by identifying king Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther with Ardashir/Bahman, son of Esfandiyan and grandson of Goshtasp, one of the Iranian shahs of the *Shāhnāmah*. After seven "obligatory" (for Persian epics) introductory chapters, Shahin begins his epic by having Rostam, the principal hero of the *Shāhnāmah* and the "king-maker" (*tāj-bakhsh*), return Bahman, whom he educated at his provincial court in Sistan, to the court of Iran.¹⁸ Before his death, Goshtasp, Ardashir's grandfather, bestows the crown on him.¹⁹ Having established this link with Iran's imperial tradition, Shahin embarks on the Book of Esther at a leisurely pace, describing Bahman's courtship of Vashti, her various forms of misbehavior, and his eventual punishment of her.

Shahin departs imaginatively from the biblical narrative both through the structure of the epic and through its numerous extra-biblical details. Structurally, he provides a double narrative cycle consisting not only of the versification of the Book of Esther, the "Esther-cycle," but also of the "Vashti-cycle," or rather of the adventures of Shiro, the son of Vashti and Ardashir. As far as the "Esther-cycle" is concerned, it has a double "crescendo" climax which extends into *'Ezrā-nāmah*. Shahin is intent on "proclaiming the miracle"²⁰ of the Book of Esther, namely, the deliverance of Persian Jewry from Haman's evil machinations, but his epic has a broader design. This becomes apparent in *'Ezrā-nāmah* where Cyrus, represented as the offspring of Queen Esther and Shah Ardashir, restores the national and religious sovereignty of the Jews in the Land of Israel and thereby, not accidentally, provides the ultimate rationalization for the marriage of a Jewish woman to a non-Jewish king. Thus in Shahin's *Ardashir-nāmah* the narrative of the Book of Esther is only a building block in the grander scheme of restoring the Jewish national edifice.

The process of "Iranization" is clearly manifest in the structure of Shahin's two epics. It is further reinforced by the narrative techniques listed above. We will now turn our attention to these through specific examples culled from *Ardashir-nāmah* and *'Ezrā-nāmah*.

17. Bacher, *Zwei Judisch-persische Dichter*, 9; Netzer, *Montakhab*, 39; idem, *'Otsar*, 29 (which gives the date as 1359).

18. For Rostam as king-maker see Olga M. Davidson, "The Crown-Bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings," *Acta Iranica* 10 (1985): 61–148; idem, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), Index, s.v. "Rostam."

19. On the complex and strained relations between Goshtasp and his son Esfandiyan see Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition* (Fayetteville, 1992), ch. 3, esp. 128–60.

20. Heb., *Pirsume nisa*'; see Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah, 3b and 18a. I am indebted to Dr. Sam Gellens for reminding me of this reference.

Description of Nature and Man-Made Environment

Nature in Persian epics and lyrical poetry is seldom portrayed for its own sake. It usually foretells or echoes the moods of the heroes (or, in the case of lyrical poetry, of the poet) and of their actions.²¹ This literary characteristic has been picked up in Persian miniature paintings. The outstanding feature of descriptions of nature is, of course, the personification of various natural elements. Shahin employs this technique frequently:

When the sun's countenance breaks into a smile
Upon seeing the world, flashing its teeth-like rays,
The earth becomes a glorious garden,
Smiling and radiant, pure and bright.
The shah rose happy from Esther's embrace. . . .²²

Even more explicit is a passage in *'Ezrā-nāmah* where events in nature describe the state of the Jews in exile about to witness the dawn of their redemption:

When the sun, out of the lapis lazuli firmament
Showed forth its yellow cheeks, it plunged
Into modesty's ocean, like lightning
Drowning in the boundless sea;
The world lamented, mourning over the sun's loss,
Dressing itself in black from head to toe,
Wailing and sighing, full of pain,
Regret and sorrow, at this malevolent sign.
When morning pure beheld the world this way,
It struck modesty prostrate and patience tore. . . .

Descriptions of the material, man-made world are usually lavish in Persian epics, which tend to describe the world of royal, or aristocratic heroes, not that of the common man. Well served in this respect by the themes of *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *'Ezrā-nāmah*, which involve royal courts, Shahin's "Homeric" list of the gifts that Ardashir sends to win Esther's hand in marriage is a fine example of the material world of his royal heroes:

A hundred rare, beautiful gifts of fabric,
A hundred bolts of satin, silk, and brocade,
A hundred *mans* of gold as red as fire,
A hundred elegant, lovely Turkish slave girls,
A hundred elegant Turkish and Chinese slave boys. . . .

21. I know of no study devoted to this aspect of Persian epics. On the role of nature in Persian lyrical and mystical poetry see C.-H. de Foucencour, *La Description de la nature dans la poésie lyrique persane du XIe siècle* (Paris, 1969); A. Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade* (Chapel Hill, 1992), Part 3.

22. This study is based on two manuscripts, #980 of the Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, and the fragment Acc. #40919 of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. The English translations that follow are my own and will be published in my *In Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature* (New Haven, forthcoming).

Needless to say, these material elements, as in the case of the natural descriptions above, cannot be found in the Book of Esther or in the prophetic books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Amplification of the Biblical Action

Shahin seamlessly integrates into his narrative details culled from extra-biblical sources, both Jewish and Muslim. His eclecticism appears to be guided entirely by the desire to enhance the characters of his epics. At times these details contribute considerably to the "Iranization" of the largely biblical figures inhabiting Shahin's epics.

In praising Esther's character before Ardashir, Hegai, the harem's overseer and the shah's friend, refers to Esther's goodness and self-sufficiency:

I've seen all her good deeds:
Nothing bad will ever come from her,
Nothing but learning and good deeds;
Not even as much as a cup of water did she
Ever request from me. . . .

There is probably more here than a reference to Esther's modest character. Here Esther's reticence echoes the midrashic interpolation which maintains that she refused to touch any foods not permitted to Jews, be they from the royal table.²³ Another such instance can be glimpsed when Ardashir's gifts reach Esther in her "palace." Shahin bestows on Esther a high, quasi-royal status even before she marries the shah, in keeping with her descent from the tribe of Benjamin from whom Saul, the first king of Israel, also descended.²⁴

While these references can be deemed highly allusive, this is not the case with our next example. Shahin refers to Esther repeatedly as "Esther the Concealed" (*Ester satīrah*). This pun is a form of homonymy (*tajnīs*), one of the many rhetorical artifices that Shahin employs in his poetry. In this particular case, it shows a creative fusion of Hebrew-Persian alliteration to enhance the overlapping Hebrew and Persian meanings of *satīrah* (concealed, hidden, secret). According to midrashic sources, Esther had earned this epithet first by remaining concealed from the king's spies searching for beautiful maidens, and second by guarding the secret of her Jewish descent from everyone at court.²⁵

Shahin sometimes uses Muslim legendary lore, Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic, seemingly accepting its veracity even when the tales are not supported by Jewish sources.²⁶ At other times, his use of Muslim legendary lore is decidedly polemi-

23. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1928 [1968 rep.]), 4: 386, and the sources cited in 6:460, n. 76.

24. Ginzberg, *Legends* 2:146.

25. "Above all she was the hidden light that suddenly shone upon Israel in his rayless darkness" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, 13a; Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:384).

26. One such example is Shahin's recounting in the *Bereshit-nāmah* of the Ishmael saga, including Abraham aiding his son in the building of the Ka'ba. See Moreen, "Ishma'iliyat."

cal and intended to “debunk” some well-accepted anti-Jewish notion, as in the case of the prophet Ezra.

In the *‘Ezrā-nāmah* Shahin describes in detail the great lengths to which Ezra went to ensure the transmission of the correct text of the Torah presumed to have perished during Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of Jerusalem and during the subsequent captivity of the Jews. Although Ezra had memorized the text, he traveled, at the insistence of the Jews, to the “land of Rekab” to consult the “sons of Moses,” that is, Levites who were supposed to have survived Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction and who had preserved perfect copies of the Torah.²⁷ Ezra traveled to this legendary land by means of God’s ineffable name and was fully satisfied that his memorized version of the Torah was identical with the Torah preserved by the Levites.²⁸

When those chosen people beheld him,
 They ran to surround him. Right away
 Ezra Recited the Torah aloud to their wise leaders;
 Verse by verse, he recited it all, leaving
 Moses’ progeny smiling; not even a dot’s worth
 Of difference existed between Moses’
 And Ezra’s versions. The leaders spoke to him;
 That illustrious gathering addressed him thus:
 “It is as if you were an angel,
 Kneaded out of purity and light;
 How else by heart could you have written down
 The entire Torah, omitting nothing from its proper place?
 In truth, this cannot be done by flesh and blood.”

Basing his arguments on Muslim sources, Shahin addresses here two of the most important polemical arguments used by Muslims against Judaism, namely, that Ezra transmitted his own, incorrect version of the original Torah,²⁹ and that the

27. Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:316–18.

28. The invocation of God by his ineffable name for theurgic purposes was a common feature of Jewish life in many places in the Middle Ages. See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York, 1977 [repr.]), 83. Its sophisticated use among kabbalists is well described in Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), ch. 8; idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), Index, s.v. “Name of God.”

29. This argument is expressed already by al-Tabari (d. 920) in his *Ta’rīkh*, ed. de Goeje (Leiden, 1881–1882), 2:692. Its lasting formulation can be found in the polemical works of Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and Samau’al al-Maghribi (d. ca. 1175). They maintain that the various invasions of the Land of Israel resulted not only in the physical destruction of the realm but also in the ruination of the Jews’ archives, including their copies of the Torah. See Ibn Hazm, *al-Fasl fi’l milal wa’l ahwā’ wa’l nihāl* (Cairo, 1928), 1:147 and 2:149. According to Ibn Hazm, Ezra the priest “concocted the Hebrew scriptures from remnants of the revelation as it was remembered by other priests and from his own additions” (Moshe Perlmann, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Polemics: Muslim-Jewish Polemics”). In *Ifhām al-Yahūd* Samau’al al-Maghribi, a Jewish apostate, claims that Ezra’s motive for introducing “reprehensible tales” into the Torah was to discredit the Davidic dynasty and prevent it from returning to power after the restoration of the Temple. See Samau’al al-Maghribi, *Ifhām al-Yahūd* (New York, 1964), 62–63. See also Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, 1992), 45.

Jews worshipped Ezra.³⁰ Clearly influenced by *qīṣāṣ* sources, Shahin describes the extraordinary lengths to which Ezra went in order to ascertain the correctness of his version of the Torah. Shahin endows Ezra with superior spiritual powers, such as flying by means of God’s ineffable name and possessing a phenomenal memory, but he “tones down” the Muslim claim that the Jews regarded Ezra as the “son of God,” and has them claim that his *powers* seem angelic. Shahin’s treatment of this episode is a good example of his reliance on Muslim (primarily *qīṣāṣ*) sources and his alteration of details not in accordance with Jewish tradition, both of which add up to subtle Jewish replies to well-established Muslim polemical motifs.

The greatest of Shahin’s imaginary feats is actually structural and consists, as mentioned above, in the linking of the *Ardashīr-nāmah* and ‘*Ezrā-nāmah* with the heroes of the *Shāhnāmah* and of making Cyrus, the savior of the Jews, the offspring of Esther and Ardashir. But numerous other, lesser details of his “plot” contribute to the “Iranization” of these two epics. One such example will suffice: Shahin’s lyrical and delicate description of Esther and Ardashir’s wedding night. In a detailed account that is entirely missing in Jewish sources,³¹ Shahin tells us that Ardashir arrived in his wedding chamber inflamed but besotted, and when he

Drew back the veil from the moon’s face
And, when the shah glimpsed her cheek,
He lost his reason, fell down senseless. . . .

Wise Esther has him sleep off his drunkenness on her knees, and only after that was the marriage consummated, so that

Through the entire night, until daybreak,
He exulted on sleep’s couch with that delightful one.
Through marriage, love and kinship, he attained
His heart’s desire from that beloved idol

30. This idea comes from Qur’ān 9:30, and is elaborated upon by collections of *qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’*. See al-Kisa’i, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa’i*, trans. W. M. Thackston (Boston, 1978), 691; Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Tha’labi, ‘*Arā’is al-majālis: qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā’* (Beirut, 1958), 346–47; al-Nisaburi, *Dāstānhā-yi payghambarān* (Tehran, 1340 Sh./1961), 353. Interestingly, the last two *qīṣāṣ* sources maintain that Ezra *did* transmit the correct version of the Torah and that it was this extraordinary feat that moved the Jews to acclaim him as the “son of God” and the only one to whom God would vouchsafe such a favor. Jewish tradition, although it regards Ezra very highly (“If Moses had not anticipated him, Ezra would have received the Torah” [*Tosefta*, Sanh. 4:7]), stops well short of such veneration (see Ginzberg, *Legends* 6:432, n. 5, and 446, n. 50). On Ezra’s role in the Qur’ān see Mahmoud Ayoub, “‘Uzayr in the Qur’ān and Muslim Tradition,” in W. M. Brinner and S. D. Ricks, eds., *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, 1986), 1:9 ff. For a thorough analysis of Ezra’s role in Muslim-Jewish polemics see Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “Ezra-‘Uzayr: Metamorphosis of a Polemical Motif” [Heb.] *Tarbiż* 55 (1986): 359–79, and a different version in *idem, Intertwined Worlds*, ch. 5.

31. In fact midrashic sources go out of their way to maintain that this marriage was never consummated. They do so by claiming that Mordecai married his niece when she became of age (Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:387), and because of this some also claim that the unfortunate shah made love merely to a “female spirit in the guise of Esther” (*ibid.*, 4:387 and 6:460, n. 80).

.....
 The shah rose happy from Esther's embrace,
 Not the least sated by his beloved's face;
 His love for her had so distracted him,
 He plucked the rose and never felt the thorns. . . .

Ardashir was consoled at Vashti's loss at last:

If Vashti ever entered into his thoughts,
 Esther would overtop her like a crown.
 In sunlight who needs the moon? If crowned,
 Who needs a hat?

It is noteworthy that while the other maidens spend a “trial” night with the shah, this is not the case with Esther, who, after being courted properly, is wedded to Ardashir properly through the officiation of a Zoroastrian priest (*mobad*).³² The happy union produced Cyrus, the future savior of exiled Jewry and the real reason, in Shahin's epic design, for the marriage between the Jewish maiden and the Zoroastrian monarch.³³

Stereotyping of Heroes

One of the most remarkable features of Shahin's epics in general, and of the *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *'Ezrā-nāmah* in particular, is the way in which he amplifies imaginatively the characters of biblical personalities. He does so primarily through detailed descriptions and dialogues not to be found in the biblical accounts. As a result, the sketchy and often elusive biblical characters so “fraught with background” become “externalized” or “foregrounded,”³⁴ in the manner of the epic characters of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and often (although not to the same extent), of the *Shāhnāmah*. Of course, the large body of Midrash provides a major Jewish literary precedent in fleshing out the manners and thoughts of biblical characters. But although Shahin often employs midrashic details, and, as we have seen, even resorts to details from *qīṣāṣ*, in *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *'Ezrā-nāmah* he freely endows his characters with traits and descriptions specifically associated with heroes of Persian epics.

32. Since Esther had to keep her religious identity hidden, she could not possibly have objected to a Zoroastrian wedding ceremony.

33. Some midrashim claim that Esther took contraceptive measures to ensure she would not become pregnant, or that she miscarried upon hearing of Mordecai's arrival at the palace “clothed in sackcloth and ashes” (Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:419 and 6:469, n. 27). According to other midrashic sources, Esther and Ahasuerus were the parents of Darius (*ibid.*, 4:366 and 6:452–53, n.5). In *'Ezrā-nāmah*, Shahin conflates the roles of Cyrus and Darius in the rebuilding of the Temple and attributes the entire activity to the age of Cyrus. Shahin's claim that Esther and Ahasuerus were the parents of Cyrus may well be based on an independent Jewish tradition preserved, possibly, only in Iran for we find this claim explicitly stated in the fourteenth-century Hebrew midrashic collection from Iran, *Sefer pitron Torah*, ed. E. E. Urbach (Jerusalem, 1978), 33.

34. Auerbach, “Odysseus' Scar,” 11–13.

The numerous non-biblical details found in the *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *‘Ezrā-nāmah* are illustrative. In the Book of Esther, and particularly in the midrashic treatment of him, Ardashir/Ahasuerus is not a paragon of intelligence, reminding us especially of Kay Kavus, that less-than-wise monarch of the *Shāhnāmah*. The midrashic sources like to emphasize that he was a foolish king.³⁵ In *Ardashīr-nāmah* this foolishness comes across in many ways, culminating towards the end of the epic in Ardashir’s ignominious death as he is swallowed by a dragon in combat.³⁶ In the earlier episodes, those connected with the Book of Esther, he is described as given more to feasting (*bazm*) than to fighting (*razm*), the twin poles of action of Iranian epics,³⁷ and as having ordered Vashti’s death in this besotted state. He comes to regret his actions but it is too late. Shahin describes Ardashir’s suffering at Vashti’s death and how he plunged into further drink and depression as a result. As we know from the Book of Esther, he thought to cure his longing for her by finding a replacement for Vashti and thus ordered the assembling of the loveliest maidens of his kingdom. However, not only does he not find an immediate replacement, Ardashir is nightly stricken by impotence. As Shahin puts it:

But, ever the more each night the shah clasped
The idols, Jupiter could not take wing.
For, among all these, he did not find
His love, his houri, his heart’s companion.
His horoscope confounded him; each morning
The shah drove away another from his presence,
And, though compelled to driving them away,
He brought in yet another to his chamber.
.....
Each time the shah reached out
To a lovely idol with moon cheeks.
Cruel fate would thwart his heart’s desire.

Hegai, the chamberlain of the harem, appears to have kept Esther “in reserve,” or, in an age-old tactic, to have saved “the best for last.” He describes her to Ardashir with high praise and the latter embarks on an elaborate courtship which is eloquently conveyed through a long Homeric—or rather, Ferdawsian—list of lavish gifts partially quoted above. As with the details of Ardashir and Esther’s wedding night, these details are not found in the Book of Esther.

Throughout these epics, and especially in the *Ardashīr-nāmah*, Shahin revels in attaching the alliterative epithet *satīrah* to Esther’s name. Ardashir’s new queen is a mysterious heroine and, like most Persian epic heroines, is powerful.

35. Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:379–81.

36. See the amusing miniatures of this scene in the illuminated copies of *Ardashīr-nāmah* in Preussischer Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, MS SPQ or. qu. 1680, fol. 173v, and the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 40919, fol. 121r; cf. a Mughal miniature on this theme (ca. 1585) in Stuart Cary Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting* (New York, 1978), 5. On the tradition of illuminated Judeo-Persian manuscripts, which imitate the popular style of Persian miniature paintings, see Vera B. Moreen, *Miniature Paintings in Judeo-Persian Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1985).

37. Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, ch. 9.

Yet she is largely mute in both *Ardashīr-nāmah* and *‘Ezrā-nāmah*, except for those verses, slightly amplified in *Ardashīr-nāmah*, which are allotted to her in the Book of Esther. She submits obediently to Mordecai's advice and we do not hear her voice even on her wedding night. However, there, as elsewhere, her daring actions speak for her.

Esther's beauty and wisdom are constantly emphasized by those around her, beginning with Hegai, the chamberlain of the royal harem. In describing her to Shah Ardashir, Hegai lays claim on her behalf to all the typical characteristics of Persian beauties:

There is a tender idol, exalted in beauty
 And learning; the like of her has never been seen
 In the world, no, not even among the houris
 Of paradise. Should you but see her cheeks
 One night, and only in a dream,
 You would never again look at the sun.
 Compared to her full moon, the moon
 Is but a crescent; next to her stature
 The cypress appears bent.

Mordecai, her uncle, is more temperate and loving in his praise:

O lovely idol, how sweet you are,
 How seemly is your manner and deportment;
 The World Keeper endowed you even as He
 Endowed the nine revolving spheres.³⁸

 God's light is manifest in your face;
 Your sunny nature is visible from afar.

The closeness between uncle and niece, a pivotal theme in the Book of Esther, continues in Shahin's epics until the end of their lives. Queen Esther is not buried at her husband's side but heeds the divine call that she was privileged to hear with her uncle and follows him, without hesitation, to their future burial place in Hamadan:

Her ladyship prepared herself along with him [Mordecai];
 She launched her boat upon the self-same sea.

 The lady gave up her rank and position.

And when Mordecai, her uncle and spiritual guide (*pīr*), dies,
 Greatly did Esther lament him, shedding tears
 Like the clouds in Adar.³⁹ Her own soul
 She relinquished amidst tears.

38. On Islamic cosmology see S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 76–79; idem, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London, 1976), 91–134.

39. The Hebrew month of Adar usually falls in the rainy season of spring. It is also the month (14th of Adar in February or March) in which Purim, the Feast of Esther, is celebrated.

In Esther's pliancy, her complete obedience toward the role God had assigned to her, lies her chief virtue in the Book of Esther as well as in Shahin's epics. Her spiritual wisdom shines through it and surpasses her famed Persian beauty.

In *Ardashīr-nāmah* Shah Ardashir has two sons, Shiro by his first wife Vashti, and Cyrus from his union with Esther. The greater part of the *Ardashīr-nāmah*, after its treatment of the Book of Esther, deals with the adventures of this first son among the fairies of China, his various hunts with and visits to his father, his father's visits to him, and so on. Much less space is devoted to Cyrus, the younger and more "righteous" son. His birth is recounted in detail as is the joy of his parents and Ardashir's lavish gifts on the occasion. His physical beauty is emphasized as well as his intelligence. Tutors and astrologers are engaged to educate him, so that by the time he was

Fourteen years old, fortune spread its wings
Over his head; in all the cities of Iran,
At the courts of intrepid heroes, no one
Waged war like him.
..... in horsemanship
He was like Rostam, the son of Zal.

Cyrus's character is more fully fleshed out in *'Ezrā-nāmah*, where he is depicted as not only having issued his famous edict to restore the Jews to their homeland and permit them to rebuild their Temple, but also as one who ordered the donation of "measures of gold and silver . . . to rebuild that Special House [the Second Temple]." He is depicted as fair and just, the Khosraw Anushirvan of his age. When a Jewish delegation headed by Ezra and Mattatiah, the last surviving Jewish prince,⁴⁰ approaches him to request his help to return to the Jewish homeland, he grants them an audience at once and inquires generously:

Tell us, what do you wish from us
Out of the royal jewels and the treasury?
I will fulfill your wishes; even beforehand
I will look with favor on your request.

Since even just monarchs have some foibles, Shahin intimates that Cyrus was not entirely perfect and remained partly alien to the Jewish spirit, since he was only part Jewish. (Shahin never tells us directly whether Cyrus's part-Jewishness played a conscious role in his decision to help the Jews, but this is strongly implied by the way the epics "justify" the marriage of Esther and Ahasuerus.) Perhaps it is because of his incomplete Jewish identity that Cyrus makes his help conditional on an act which is actually a transgression of Jewish law: he asks Mattatiah to accept from his, Cyrus's own hands, a cup of wine. This seemingly innocuous act is fraught with problems for an observant Jew who is not supposed to partake of food prepared by gentile hands or drink wine

40. Ginzberg, *Legends* 4:286 and 291, where he is identified with king Zedekiah, and *ibid.*, 6:382, n. 1. Mattatiah's role in Shahin's account appears to be a conflation of the roles of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Jehoiachim, the last captive king of the Davidic line (Ezra 3:2), and possibly Sheshbazzar, "the prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:8). See Peter R. Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (New York, 1970), 204.

which, in addition, may have been offered in libation to idols.⁴¹ When Mattatiah asks for a delay to consult Ezra and the other sages, Cyrus grants his wish. Ezra and his confreres permit Mattatiah to transgress the law in this one instance in order to be able to fulfill their higher goals, returning to the Land of Israel and rebuilding the Temple.

Such foibles do not detract from Shahin's moving eulogy on Cyrus's death. He inveighs against destructive Time, and praises the departed monarch:

He sat upon the highest of all thrones,
Never deprived of a sense of justice.
He guarded his patrimony while God Himself
Kept guard over him.

Death, the inevitable, found even this just man:

When his cypress stature became bent,
He grew weary of his own company.
Anguish assailed the depths of his heart;
He melted away in grief's crucible.
One day he cried out in pain a few times;
Calamity kneaded him back and forth;
When its work reached his soul, he gave it up
And toppled like a tall cypress.
At once his soul fled from his body
Abandoning all good and bad, all this and that.
His affairs fell from his throne
Unto the burial plank;
All twisted from royal work,
Beauty washed out of his clothes
Once made of silk and brocade.
Instead of scattering musk on his crowned head,
They sprinkled camphor on his ivory bosom.
They passed his accouterments from hand to hand,
And then they opened up the crypt for him.

Shahin continues his complaint against Time for about 37 more verses, all of which have a very strong (albeit rather clichéd) Sufi coloring. For example:

Being is the realm of annihilating Time;
Better transcend the worship of the self.
Shahin, worship God and prosper; behold
With both your eyes painting and Artist.

Didactic Comments and Speeches

Shahin's penchant for didacticism, revealed already in his treatment of Cyrus, is even more prominent in his description of Mordecai, another major protagonist in the Book of Esther. The Mordecai of the *Ardashir-nāmah* and *'Ezrā-nāmah* is a great deal more unworldly, Sufi-like, and austere than even the Book of Esther

41. For biblical precedents see Genesis 43:32 and, especially, Daniel 1:8. The law is clearly formulated in the Babylonian Talmud, *'Avodah Zarah*, 29b, 34b, 38a.

suggests. These characteristics come across in two of his major speeches. The first, part soliloquy, part earnest advice to Esther, he delivers upon accepting Shah Ardashir's gifts on his niece's behalf:

... When Mordecai saw all
The shah's gifts, their vast quantity
Meant nothing in his eyes.
"How far did Qarun [Korah] go with his wealth?
How did he topple from greatness?
To me God's mercy surpasses gold and silver,
It is greater by far than treasures,
Signet rings, and thrones.
He who gave life to a weakling like me,
And gave me reason, eloquence, and wisdom,
He does provide my daily sustenance,
Never diminishes our portion.
What have we to do with gold and silver?
This now is a great burden on my soul."

Yet he is not unrealistic; he knows that the shah cannot be refused. His advice to Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity, a single verse in the Book of Esther (2:10), is 34 verses long here. In this speech Mordecai enjoins Esther to adopt a proper, just behavior toward all human beings. He also conveys to her some of his own misgivings about the cheating ways of this world—a stock motif in Persian, especially Sufi, poetry:

Each day the world elevates a person,
Entrusting to him a new station, but
How can one's heart grow attached to it?

Mordecai's speech culminates in a parable about the oyster shell within which a pearl resides only temporarily until it is fished out, the protective shell is removed, and the pearl is pierced. It is not difficult to discern that Mordecai sees himself as the protective shell of Esther, the precious pearl, destined to be "pierced" by Ardashir. This is a stock motif of Sufi poetry,⁴² yet Shahin may also have been inspired by a brief, indirect reference in the tractate *Megillah*.⁴³ The motif gains added poignancy here as it expresses Mordecai's grief at losing his beloved niece.

Shahin gives free reign to Mordecai's inclination for long didactic speeches, a hallmark of the didacticism prevalent in Sufi epics (although all Iranian epics, both "tragic," i.e., the *Shāhnāmeh*, and romances, as well as other forms of poetry, share this characteristic to some extent). This occurs towards the end of

42. An essentially neoplatonic motif (body and soul), it is especially loved by Rumi who uses it to demonstrate the "organic" link between lover and Divine Beloved. See, for example, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, 1983), 213, 264, and 303.

43. "R[abbi] Eleazar further said in the name of R. Hanina: When a righteous man dies, he dies only for his own generation [Epstein, n. 9, 'and his name, or his soul survives']. It is with him as with a man who loses a pearl. Wherever it is, it remains a pearl, and it is lost only to its owner" (*Megillah*, 15a in *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Seder Mo'ed and I. Epstein [London 1938], 89–90).

‘Ezrā-nāmah in a scene again without biblical parallel. According to Shahin, both Mordecai and Esther receive in a dream a simultaneous divine command to proceed to Hamadan, the place where they will then die. (Since the purported tomb of these two heroes can still be visited in Hamadan, it is easy to see the necessity for some Iranian Jewish author to address the question of how they came to be buried there side by side.)

Mordecai and Esther obey the command at once. Mordecai proceeds to relinquish his earthly powers: “The exalted sage gave up both throne and signet ring.” The two journey to Hamadan incognito and seek lodging in a synagogue. Understandably, neither falls asleep. Mordecai launches into a moving soliloquy in which he expresses less acceptance of his fate than one would expect from a pious Jew. The soliloquy, eleven verses long, is on the tyranny of Time (*dahr/zamān*), very much in the spirit of “the late Sasanian Zurvanite conception of Time as Fate and Death.”⁴⁴

In the spirit of the tragic epic conception of time, but not in consonance with prevalent Jewish biblical or rabbinical theology, which avoid such overt dualism and negative views of theodicy,⁴⁵ Mordecai rails against Time and Fate:

Of us, of you and me, the world has had
Its surfeit. Take care, for I’m departing
.....
Time’s sweet is all poison and alloyed joy,
Devoid of righteousness, faith and religion.
.....
Time nourishes itself on affliction,
Raises its head when the body is distressed;
.....
The hour of death is here. Much have I
Struggled in Time with its revolving spheres
And quaffs of poison.
..... Annihilating Time
Hands me the cup which I pass on
To face the divine Cup-bearer.⁴⁶

Mordecai appears bitter and unreconciled with the major role he has played in the divine scheme of Jewish national restoration, not to mention with his extremely long life. In true (Muslim) monotheistic fashion, he does not direct his anguish at God but rather at “Time,” the all-encompassing designation for the

44. According to the Zurvanite conception of Time “. . . [it] is cyclical and not linear. It is a cycle viewed from the center and not from the periphery, a cycle revolving vertically and not horizontally. Our special experience of it is in ascent and descent rather than round and round. And it is at this inner level of the operation of Time that we are faced with the element of paradox. Time, as fate, brings ups and downs, which is to say that it generates both good and evil” (William L. Hanaway, “Ferdowsi and the Art of Tragic Epic,” in Yarshater, *Persian Literature*, 110–113, based on R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* [London, 1961], 240–41).

45. A notable exception is, of course, the Book of Ecclesiastes, to which, however, we cannot trace Shahin’s words directly.

46. A Sufi epithet for God.

negative attributes of the divine in Persian and Arabic poetry.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Mordecai's railing does not preclude a graceful exit on his part:

Having said this, his soul quickly took off;
He sighed, and bid it a last farewell.
Sprinkling his sweet soul upon the Friend;⁴⁸
The age's perfection departed in style.

Mordecai's comments and speeches are stereotypical of Persian epic heroes disappointed with their fate. Were it not for our knowledge that he is, after all, a biblical hero, we would be hard put to distinguish him from the multitude of disappointed heroes in the Persian epic tradition.

Shahin imaginatively embellishes the *Ardashir-nāmah* and *‘Ezrā-nāmah* with details that cannot be found in the biblical sources of his inspiration. Through the four narrative techniques described above, he “Iranizes” his cast of biblical characters and manages to link them directly not only to Iranian history but also to Persian literature. Thus, Shahin makes *Ardashir-nāmah* and *‘Ezrā-nāmah* as much part of the Iranian as of the Jewish literary heritage.⁴⁹

It is interesting to note, in conclusion, that the most concentrated effort and the largest number of epics on biblical themes written by Jews emerged in the Iranian milieu, undoubtedly under the influence of a burgeoning tradition of writing epics after Ferdawsi (d. ca. 1020–1025), the “father” of the Iranian epic tradition. Under this influence, several Jewish poets, beginning with Shahin (as far as we know), mined the Bible as a chief “national” source of information in a manner similar to Ferdawsi’s pre-Islamic sources for his grand national opus, the *Shāhnāmah*.⁵⁰ By “clothing” biblical themes and characters in the garb of Persian language and rhetoric, they appear to have intended not only to “improve” or “beautify” the biblical narratives—an aesthetic judgment that reveals their deep attachment to their native Persian language—but also to vie, or at the very least invite comparison, with the great epics of Iran. To what extent they have succeeded remains an open question, since these Judeo-Persian epics are hardly known to, let alone studied by, scholars in both the Jewish and Iranian fields.

Is Shahin fair to his biblical sources? Do we lose the biblical flavor of these accounts through this process of “Iranization”? Are these questions relevant at

47. The concept is deeply embedded in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, from which it was easily absorbed into Persian poetry given its similarity with the Sasanian Zurvanite conceptions mentioned above (see *El*, s.v. “*dahr*”).

48. Another Sufi epithet for God.

49. I am indebted to Professor Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi for his helpful comments in this regard and especially for drawing my attention to the fact that the mythical and religious heroes of Iran underwent a similar process of “Islamization” during the first centuries of Islamic influence in Iran. See Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Contested Memories: Narrative Structures and Allegorical Meanings of Iran’s Pre-Islamic History,” *Iranian Studies* 29, nos. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 1996): 149–75.

50. For a thorough analysis of how Ferdawsi relates to his Iranian narratives of history and to early Islamic models of historiography, see Julie S. Meisami, “The Past in the Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia,” *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 247–76.

all? If they are, the answers must forever be divided between those who will see the process as a “betrayal” of the biblical sources and those who will delight in the creation of a new work of art inspired by ancient tales.

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